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# Like a Terrible Fish: A Collection of Stories

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### Recommended Citation

Ledford, Hannah, "Like a Terrible Fish: A Collection of Stories. " Master's Thesis, University of Tennessee, 2013.  
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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Hannah Ledford entitled "Like a Terrible Fish: A Collection of Stories." I have examined the final electronic copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.

Michael Knight, Major Professor

We have read this thesis and recommend its acceptance:

Allen Wier, Margaret Lazarus Dean

Accepted for the Council:

Dixie L. Thompson

Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

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Like a Terrible Fish: A Collection of Stories

A Thesis Presented for the  
Master of Arts  
Degree  
University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Hannah Ledford  
May 2013

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*To Mom for always being my first reader and inspiration  
And to Dad for being my biggest fan and best publicist*

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This collection of stories would not be what it is without the guidance of Michael Knight, Margaret Lazarus Dean, and Allen Wier. I must express a great appreciation for all of their support, for their intelligent and helpful readings, and for the time they spent with me to improve my work. I would also like to thank my classmates and peers for their brilliant ideas, suggestions, and interpretations. Thanks to Jessica, Kristin, Tom, Tommy, Abigail, Natalie, and Lindsey who have been inspirational to me in writing this collection. I would also like to thank the University of Tennessee, Department of English for helping me to become a better writer and a better scholar.

## ABSTRACT

In this collection of stories, Hannah Ledford examines fairytales and domesticity to portray the difficulties of characters at many different stages of life, particularly as they deal with growing up and building relationships with family. Her characters are often restricted by their society in some way, and they attempt to either reconcile themselves with or break free from expectations of femininity, sexuality, motherhood, and grief.

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## Introduction

### Writing With Cinderella in Mind: Using Fairytale Elements in Contemporary Short Stories

Lately, it seems like fairytales are everywhere. Just in 2012 and the few months of 2013 there have been multiple popular fairytale movies and television shows, Rupert Sanders' *Snow White and the Huntsman*, Bryan Singer's film version of "Jack and the Beanstalk" entitled *Jack the Giant Slayer*, and the ABC television series "Once Upon a Time," now in its second season, which features characters like Snow White, Rumplestiltskin, Mulan, and many others. The media has been in fairytale overload, constantly retelling or reusing different elements and tropes of the fairytale genre. In Kevin Paul Smith's *The Postmodern Fairytale*, he attempts to explain the important elements of the fairytale phenomenon, including the many ways that fairytales are used as literary intertexts and the reasoning behind their popularity. Smith believes that this fairytale obsession can be found throughout history in popular fiction, "from Shakespeare to *Shrek*," but the way that an author uses a fairy tale has changed in the last three decades. He claims, "Rather than being something that underlies a narrative and informs its structure, or a handy metaphor, the fairytale has become central to the work" (1). This is not only because of the interest and popularity of the fairytale genre, but also because of a need to reclaim the moralizing stories for the past in different ways, particularly in terms of "highlighting the underlying misogyny of certain stories" or emphasizing the ways in which fairytales have been used to perpetuate a normative social order which places women in an inferior position (Smith 36). Truly, postmodern writers like Angela Carter, Margaret Atwood, and Jeanette Winterson have used fairytales to subvert the very traditional gender roles represented by the original stories and to bring attention to the complex construction of female subjectivity in postmodern society. But still—though some critics have labeled ours as the "postfeminist" era—fairytales remain a

popular media and literary intertext; they continue to necessitate reevaluation and reclamation, which is particularly demonstrated in the way they deal with gender.

For a current writer, it can be daunting to incorporate such traditional, popular, and longstanding stories, stories that have been told and retold, reimagined, and revised for centuries. In some ways it may even feel restrictive to attempt to write a piece of creative work with another text in mind. However, in spite of these daunting precedents and possible restrictions, there are numerous opportunities for exploration when writing a short story that revolves around a traditional fairytale. I will focus on what I believe to be the most important aspects of writing with fairytales, including voice, imagery, theme, and character, while simultaneously examining the possibilities of using fairytales for the creation of short fiction. Not only will I draw from my own short stories and experiences with the fairytale genre, but I will also look at how other works of short fiction from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries similarly incorporate these classic tropes.

Smith notes that the integration of fairytales and *Jane Eyre* in Jeanette Winterson's *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*, illuminates the comparisons of Bronte's Victorian novel to "Bluebeard," "Cinderella," and "Beauty and the Beast" (46). This discussion serves as an example of the metafictional importance of the fairytale in literature, the way in which just mentioning or examining the elements of the genre in a text can transform the way in which a reader looks at a novel or a story. Smith mentions seven other possibilities for the fairytale as an intertext as well, from using the title to indicate the intertextual agenda to the reader, to simply re-vising the tale in a way that maintains most of the major events and characters, like in Angela Carter's "The Bloody Chamber." However, while the possibilities of how fairytales have been incorporated into postmodern fiction are discussed in detail, an examination of the craft of

writing elements of fairytales in short fiction is of more interest to the current writer. While it is important to note the differences and their significance in the changes that Carter made from the “Bluebeard” fairytale, the more pressing question for the writer: how does she pull it off?

Angela Carter’s successful collection recommends a closer inspection, and while one might assume that writers are always concerned with such particular craft elements as appear throughout any fictional work, in Carter’s work, and that of other contemporary writers that work with fairytales, certain aspects are often used in a way that establishes the mode of the fairytale genre. Whether an author chooses to entirely rewrite a fairytale to a distinct purpose or only alludes to a fairytale image that influences the interpretation of the text, there are several distinct elements of such a story—some of which may be used more heavily than others depending on the work—that are implemented in such a way to either reinforce the fairytale genre and signal to the reader the importance of a particular tale or to ultimately subvert and dilute the traditional outline of the fairytale.

## **Voice**

*There was once a man who lived in a forest with his three sons and beautiful daughter. One day a golden coach drawn by six horses and tended by several servants came driving up to his house. After the coach stopped, a king stepped out and asked him if he could have his daughter for his wife.*

—Grimms’ Bluebeard

Of course, it is evident that any tale that begins with “Once upon a time” or even simply “Once,” establishes a great level of time and distance from the action of the story. The narrator seems an omniscient onlooker, one who refrains from emotional investment in the tale or the actions of the character. The narrator knows what the characters are thinking, understands the

motivations of their actions, but does not interfere. There is a certain level of distant presentation that bestows the tale upon the reader, which offers its importance, and particularly its moral, with a great consciousness of the nature of storytelling. This is unsurprising considering the long and great oral tradition of the fairytale genre and the way that authors like the Grimm Brothers and Charles Perrault tried to incorporate this tradition into their stories. The very common convention of the distance of the voice can be adapted in several ways by the contemporary author.

In my short story “Iris,” for instance, I attempted to begin the story with this very traditional and distant storytelling voice. The story, my very modern interpretation of “Snow White,” begins with the main character giving birth to her seventh child. In spite of the fact that this is a very emotional event for Iris, the narrative voice is restrained. Although the narrator is a limited third person, which sometimes even incorporates free-indirect discourse, I wanted the story, particularly the beginning, to set the conventional tone of the fairytale, indicating to the reader its use and adaptation of the fairytale genre, even in the case that the intertextual use of “Snow White” is unperceived. For even if the inspiration for the story is never even considered by a reader, even if the allusions to “Snow White” don’t come to a solid fruition, one will still receive Iris’ thoughts and actions through this particular type of presentation indicative of the narrative consciousness of the story and long and important oral tradition of storytelling.

The same is true of the voice in many other modern fairytales. For instance, Carter’s “The Snow Child” begins as a report, demonstrating the level of distance of the narrator and immediately locating the story in the fairytale genre: “Midwinter—invincible, immaculate. The Count and his wife go riding, he on a grey mare and she on a black one, she wrapped in the glittering pelts of white foxes...” (91). However, this is not to diminish the success—the sometimes greater success—of those fairytale revisions that are told in first person and may not

exemplify this fairytale-style distance. In “The Bloody Chamber,” for instance, Carter demonstrates the power she wields with the first-person fairytale, told from the perspective of a seventeen-year-old girl who marries a man who has killed all of his previous wives. Perhaps, one of the simplest answers for why this works so well for her fairytale is that this is one of the few things that changes from the original. Carter has so many other elements indicative of the fairytale genre to bring her audience to the attention of the intertextuality of her fiction—the action of the story itself, the imagery, and motifs—that she is able to play around with the classic voice, to represent the vulnerability and emotion of the main character, without decreasing the fairytale style of her story. For instance, in the moment when the main character discovers the dead wives, the reader is able to enter her consciousness: “With trembling fingers, I prised open the front of the upright coffin, with its sculpted face caught in a rictus of pain. Then, overcome, I dropped the key I still held in my other hand. It dropped into the forming pool of her blood” (29). This personal account of this moment not only demonstrates the horror of the story, but also shows the fear, naiveté, and almost satirical innocence of the main character. The reader is fully presented with the ridiculousness of the female character as constructed in the fairytale genre because of this narrative choice.

Another reason for this first person success is in some ways what Smith refers to as Carter’s “characteristically opulent prose” (35). Although traditional fairytales are often rather simple in language and style, in this case Carter’s grandiose representation works to benefit her story. It quickly indicates to the reader that the story takes place in a past time, in the time of the original tale though even if this hypertext was undiscovered, a reader could still perceive the purpose of this particular language. “The Bloody Chamber opens with, “I remember how, that night, I lie awake in the wagon-lit in a tender, delicious ecstasy of excitement my burning cheek

pressed against the impeccable linen of the pillow and the pounding of my heart mimicking that of the great pistons ceaselessly thrusting the train that bore me through the night, away from Paris, away from girlhood, away from the white, enclosed quietude of my mother's apartment, into the unguessable country of marriage" (7). While this sentence greatly differs from the simple Grimm version of "Bluebeard," it does succeed in transporting the reader to a place far from the typical landscape in which they are reading the text, demonstrating that the narrative occurs in what could be called "Once upon a time." Of course, this prose is later supplemented by other elements indicative of the fairytale, but the first sentence makes a lasting impression on the reader and begins the transition into the fairytale world.

Similarly, Emma Donahue's collection of short fairytale stories entitled *Kissing the Witch: Old Tales in New Skins* works to place the reader in the familiar realm of the fairytale, though there are significant changes to each story. Donahue also uses first person in her stories, but often a great level of narrative distance remains even with this adjustment. Each story is connected to the next, meaning the character from one goes on to tell how they got to that place in the next story creating a string of related tales going from one character to the another. Donahue even uses the concept of past lives to weave her characters together in these different fairytales; even if each one is told in first person, telling a story of something that happened in a past life still works to provide that conscious storytelling narrative of the traditional fairytale. For example, "The Tale of the Rose," a Beauty and the Beast story, begins, "In this life, I have nothing to do but cavort on the wind, but in my last it was my fate to be a woman" (27). The narrator goes on to tell the story of when she was sold to a beast in a castle. Like Carter, Donahue has enough familiar images and motifs to easily indicate the fairytale nature of the story, and she still uses a great amount of narrative distance. This combination allows for a

dramatic change in the tale's ending and an important metafictional moment when the main character discovers that the Beast in the castle is actually a beautiful woman. She says, "This was a strange story, one I would have to learn a new language to read, a language I could not learn except by trying to read the story" (39). It is clearly important that Donahue allow the reader to recognize the story she is revising through multiple fairytale elements so the reader will then recognize the way that she has envisioned the story for a new audience in a new era, subverting the traditional roles that the original tale reinforced for its audience.

The choice that the author makes about voice is relative to the other fairytale elements of the story. Opening with a particularly restrained and distanced account can provide a quick entry into an important element of the fairytale voice even for a story that takes place in a present day world of laptops and cell phones. However, even if she chooses to forego this narrative distance in a story, an author can still work to create a voice similar to that of the fairytale. Just as Carter's grandiose style indicates a time of the past and her stories' settings immediately place the reader in a fairytale world, a contemporary author can adapt their language and style to create a story reminiscent of the voice of the traditional fairytale.

## **Imagery**

*It was she who cleaned the plates and the stairs, who scrubbed the rooms of the mistress and her daughters. She slept on a wretched straw mattress at the top of the house in a garret, while her sisters occupied rooms with parquet floors and the most fashionable beds and mirrors in which they could regard themselves from head to toe.*

-Perrault's Cinderella

Of course, not all fairytale rewrites are so obvious as to immediately indicate the tale to which they are referring, and certainly not all texts that use a fairytale intertext are necessarily

meant to even retell the classic story; perhaps they are only using a reference. Whatever the case, certain fairytale images can be an important indicator of the fairytale context that surrounds a story and can in some instances shape the way in which a reader can interpret it. In Carter's "The Bloody Chamber," the title very evidently conjures a specific image, one directly related to the events of the classic Bluebeard tale. Many stories, however, use a subtler fairytale image that may immediately trigger an awareness of the intertext to the reader, or it may go unnoticed.

The use of this fairytale imagery on its most subtle level brings to mind my short story "Like a Terrible Fish." Certainly, out of my whole collection, this story seems to stand alone as one that is not inspired by any fairytale; it simply tells of a woman who seems to be having a mid-life crisis after getting laid off from her job. There is a direct mention of Cinderella on page four, where Catherine imagines herself in the fairytale roll, waiting around for something to happen even though she is already married with a "prince charming." She hopes that perhaps her older neighbor Mary could be a possible fairy godmother, leading her in the right direction—though she is very quickly disappointed. It would be easy for a reader to quickly dismiss this mention of Cinderella and to forget all about the image created in this moment of Catherine with a mop in hand, working to clean her kitchen floor. However, it would also be possible for this fairytale intertext to shape the entire story. Catherine becomes a Cinderella figure, the women from the bridge club become her evil step-sisters, who regard her as an outcast until she alters their perception with something that seems to them almost like magic—marijuana—and Mark, the neighborhood student, becomes her fairy godmother. Hopefully, a reader can still find meaning in the story without this classic fairytale overlay, but the use of a very brief fairytale image here does open the story up for new possibilities and allows the reader to view a



Cinderella who is not happy with just having prince charming, who wants to find something wonderful to fulfill her life, and who ultimately has a rather ambiguous ending.

The same could be said for my several “Peter” stories, particularly “The Island” and “Nursery,” both of which take place in Peter and Alex’s childhood bedroom. The image created in these stories is of a nursery with a large window, a place that has seen both imagination and excitement and extreme sorrow. “The Island” conjures the image of children playing, jumping on beds, and possibly even attempting to fly. “Nursery” provides the image of a lonely woman in a rocking chair, waiting by the window and longing for her lost children. Assuming that the reader is willing to accept *Peter Pan* as a literary fairytale, there is quite a lot of fairytale imagery present in these stories meant to explore some of the more complex issues of motherhood than are present in the *Peter Pan* tale.

The use of metonymy in Donahue’s tales runs in the same vein. Each story is named after a single prominent object that represents the whole of the fairytale. For instance, “The Tale of the Shoe,” is the title of a story quite like “Cinderella,” and “The Tale of the Rose” is the name of a story that very closely resembles a “Beauty and the Beast” tale. The one very simple image of the title is able to evoke all of the important fairytale intertexts that are important for interpreting Donahue’s text. Donahue supplements this image with other fairytale elements as well. For instance, even if a reader did not immediately connect the image of the shoe with the fairytale Cinderella, the distance of the tone in the beginning of the story and the relation of Donahue’s character to the easily recognized fairytale character would emphasize the importance of the metonymy of the title. It also connects the image of the main character cleaning the house that Donahue presents to the reader in the first pages of the story: “I scrubbed and swept because there was nothing else to do. I raked out the hearth with my fingernails, and scoured the floor

until my knees bled. I counted grains of rice and divided brown beans from black” (1-2). This image easily demonstrates the connection to the original tale, although in Donahue’s story the voices that force her character to do these chores are inside her head. Therefore, with the main link being the use of fairytale image, this could also be connected to “Like a Terrible Fish,” where Catherine is scrubbing the floor though no one is forcing her to do so.

Francesca Lia Block also uses the metonymy of the fairytale title in her collection, *The Rose and the Beast: Fairytales Retold*. Similarly to Donahue, Block’s titles are short—in fact only one-word—parts indicative of a single fairytale image that often represents the whole tale. However, some of Block’s titles require an extra amount of work from the reader in that she sometimes makes it difficult to understand the fairytale she is incorporating in the work. For instance, the story “Charm,” does not immediately indicate the fairytale intertext used by Block in her story. However, she quickly supplements her title with images of needles to demonstrate the story’s relation to the classic Sleeping Beauty tale. In her review of *The Rose and the Beast*, Jan Susina faults these stripped down or “anorexic” versions of the tales; however, in many cases, the short, simple nature of each tale make the significant images like the rose, bones, or ice only stand out further.

Another powerful contemporary fairytale image is the ascension of the mother character in Kelcey Parker’s “Mermaids” in her collection *For Sale by Owner*. Parker’s intriguing last image of the mother rising into the air above her daughter’s birthday party at Chuck E. Cheese makes a connection to the similar image from Hans Christian Andersen’s “The Little Mermaid.” Because of this moment in the story, the reader can in many ways connect Parker’s character to the little mermaid of the fairytale (*not* Disney’s Ariel, as Parker demonstrates in the beginning of the story). She is a woman whose life seems not to have lived up to her expectations, whose

wishes—though she is married to her “prince”—have not come true, who feels as though she is only pretending to be a mother as the little mermaid pretended to be human. Though of course, many other elements of Parker’s story reveal this fairytale intertext, like the title, the distance from the unnamed characters, and the direct mention of Hans Christian Andersen’s literary fairytale, it is the final, magical image that truly reveals the power and importance of the fairytale to the story and connects the main character to the mermaid in a way that makes a lasting impact.

Often, the powerful images that appear in fiction are not easily forgotten. For this reason, using specific recognizable images to connect to and subvert or revise those used in an original fairytale can make a significant impact on the interpretation of the story. Even just using one very specific image can work to create significant meaning in a text, like the image of a woman scrubbing a house or even the simple reference to a shoe. Especially in combination with other fairytale elements, using these very specific and recognizable images can alert the reader to the intertexts used in a story, and to the vast literary conversation that this story is entering, which can ultimately dispel or reinforce that particular discourse.

## **Subjects and Themes**

*“I’ll do just as you say,” Little Red Cap promised her mother. Well, the grandmother lived out in the forest, half an hour from the village, and as soon as Little Red Cap entered the forest, she encountered the wolf. However, Little Red Cap did not know what sort of wicked animal he was and was not afraid of him.*

-Grimms’ Little Red Cap

It may seem surprising after hundreds of years of storytelling that the themes that appear in contemporary literature are very similar to those that are present in classic fairytales. Themes dealing with love, courage, deceit, and endurance, typical explorations of the fairytale genre, are

still of much interest to the audience of the twenty-first century. For this reason, a more complex exploration of the themes of classic tales, one that includes more psychologically developed characters or a new perception of the ideas of an original tale, can be extremely fruitful for the interested fiction writer. Of course, postmodern writers have re-envisioned fairytales to examine and question the gender roles they present to their audience, but there are still many themes and subjects to be pulled apart, to be analyzed and revised for a new audience.

A particular example can be found from the use of Little Red Riding Hood, a popular tale that has been constantly reimagined in many different genres. In the past decade there have been more interpretations of this classic story including everything from *Hoodwinked!* (2005), an animated film starring Red as a black belt with a sassy granny and the much darker interpretation *Red Riding Hood* (2011) where the wolf in a village is actually a werewolf, meaning everyone soon becomes a suspect for the murders taking place there. However, both of these examples, while extremely different, still have a common theme that comes from the original story: the danger of the unknown.

Of course, another commonality of revisions of the Red Riding Hood tale is the sexual overtones between Red and the wolf. This is especially true of Angela Carter's "In the Company of Wolves," where the wolf asks Red for a kiss, and the story ends with the line, "See! sweet and sound she sleeps in granny's bed, between the paws of the tender wolf" (118). Further, one could find the theme of the sexual predator in Block's story "Wolf," in which a young woman tries to run from her mother's boyfriend, though the man manages to reach her grandmother's house before her. As Susina says in her review, "Block's fairytales are carefully revised in order to empower and give their young female protagonists a voice" (233). This is certainly evident in the reader's identification with the main character of "Wolf," especially because of the sexual

implications in the story. This theme is even evident in the moral of Perrault's version of the tale, which says, "One sees here that young children, / Especially pretty girls, / Polite, well-taught, and pure as pearls, / Should stay on guard against all sorts of men" (Zipes 747). I attempt to use both of these themes in my story "The Beast You've Made of Me" to continue to explore the subject matter of the original tale and to examine how such ideas are shaped and changed by present-day American society. In my version, Maryanne, the main character, is certainly fearful of the unknown; she does not understand sexuality, and she is averse to learning anything about the subject at the start of the story. However, after an encounter with a stranger named Jake, Maryanne starts to reject her naivety and innocence and become the very predator that she feared, thus continuing in a cycle of victimization. In this exploration the classic themes of the fairytale become central to an understanding of gender roles and sexuality in the twenty-first century.

This particular theme also makes me think of a moment in Djuna Barnes *Nightwood*. Though the entire novel is not a retelling of any fairytale, when Nora is watching the cross-dressing Dr. Matthew O'Connor, she thinks, "God, children know something they can't tell; they like Red Riding Hood and the wolf in bed! (79). This quick fairytale reference is indicative of many of the major subjects of the novel, of complex sexual desires, of the blend between sexuality and an animal human nature, of a break in normative social behaviors. Even in a complicated and multi-faceted modernist novel, the reference to a classic fairytale is symbolic of many of the interesting themes woven throughout the text. This demonstrates the possibilities for the symbolic weight that a simple fairytale reference can hold.

Another common subject that is explored to a new purpose in modern day fairytales is love, which is certainly exemplified by Emma Donahue's "The Tale of the Rose." For the most

part, this story stays close to Jean-Marie Leprince de Beaumont's classic "Beauty and the Beast." A young, beautiful woman is sold to a beast in a castle because of her father's mistake. Of course, throughout most of the story the young woman is afraid of the beast, though she has not even seen what is underneath the hood of her "captor." However, when she eventually realizes that she loves the beast, she unveils a beautiful woman who has simply chosen to live alone in the isolated castle. This tale incorporates those same themes as the classic story, themes of loving in spite of appearance and having compassion for everyone, things that certainly pertain to its contemporary audience. Yet, the story is also able to use these themes to a new purpose that revises the fairytale and allows for a love that does not fit the heterosexual social order the classic story imposes on its audience. The ending is the most powerful moment, which reinforces the themes of the story while also demonstrating its relation to a present-day audience: "As the years flowed by, some villagers told travelers of a beast and a beauty who lived in a castle and could be seen walking on the battlements, and others told of two beauties, and others, of two beasts" (40).

Kelcey Parker provides an entry to one of the themes of "Mermaids" through the use of an epigraph at the beginning from the original fairytale: "Nothing gave her so much pleasure as to hear about the world above the sea" (105). This epigraph immediately reaffirms the reader's suspicions that the title is referring to the classic fairytale, and it indicates one of the themes present in the story: curiosity about a different life. Much of the story consists of a daughter questioning her mother about whether wishes come true because the young girl wants to be a mermaid for her birthday. The mother also expresses that being a mother and having her daughter seem "unreal" to her, representing this curiosity about having a life different from the one she is living, a theme from Hans Christian Andersen's original tale.

Of course, the subjects and themes of such classic fairytales like those involving Little Red Riding Hood and a beauty and a beast have many important and timeless messages, which is perhaps one of the reasons that they have remained so popular for centuries. It is certainly logical for a writer to want to incorporate these themes in fiction and to use elements from fairytales to do so or even just to use them as an inspiration for the creation of a new story. Truly, one of the most exciting things about the use of fairytale themes in short stories is the opportunity to stretch them to fit a new world, to reaffirm the positive lessons they may teach about love and courage and to revise those restrictive elements that put pressure on society to duplicate a certain normative behavior perpetuated by the original tales. In this way, children and adults alike can learn new and valuable lessons that are packaged by the same classic setting, but do not adhere to such strict, traditional boundaries.

## **Character**

*The dwarves said: "If you will keep house for us, cook and make the beds, wash and sew and knit, and if you will keep everything tidy and clean, you can stay with us and you shall lack for nothing." "Yes," said Snow White, "with all my heart," and she stayed with them.*

-Grimms' Little Snow-White

In *The Postmodern Fairytale*, Smith quotes Margaret Atwood, who in a discussion of *The Handmaid's Tale* asked, "What do you think when you see someone in red carrying a basket?" (qtd. in Smith 22). Although, certainly, naming a character after a certain fairytale heroine can be a quick indication of the importance of the fairytale genre to the story, of even more concern is the description of the character. Even if the character of a story is named Belinda, if she is wearing some token red hood and cape, then there is a pretty obvious fairytale reference, just at Atwood was inferring. Of course, less obvious are those characters that are modernized and

revised. For instance, in “The Beast You’ve Made of Me,” Maryanne’s token wardrobe item, mentioned several times throughout the story, is a little red string bikini. The fact that the main character is wearing a red bikini should not necessarily link her to Red Riding Hood, but when one also considers the nature of this bikini, the way it contributes to the description of her character’s vulnerability, and of course the way it marks her as a target for Jake, the fairytale intertext becomes conceivable. This was my major intention in the moment where Jake asks her over the phone what she is wearing, and Maryanne only agrees to tell him the color: red.

However, using descriptions of fairytale characters and their actions is not simply a tool for indicating that there is some kind of fairytale inspiration or commentary at play in a piece of fiction. The use of fairytale characters, much like the genre’s important themes, can yield rather interesting and dynamic stories because of the way in which an author can manipulate reader expectations. A particular example of this is in John Connolly’s *The Book of Lost Things*, a novel with an original fairytale story that incorporates many different classic characters. On a journey through a fairytale kingdom, the main character, David, encounters seven dwarves who refer to each other as “comrade” and speak constantly of the “Great Struggle” (123-125). Although these characters are easily recognizable as the dwarves who are so significant in the Grimms’ classic fairytale, Connolly makes them more interesting, certainly more comical, and he turns them into small, devoted communists, who are greatly concerned with class and workers’ oppression and also entirely frightened by the woman they live with. This woman is Snow White, but although she has the same name as the sweet, innocent princess in the fairytale, she is described much differently in David’s perspective: “Standing before him was the biggest, fattest lady that David had ever seen. Her face was caked with white make-up. Her hair was black, held back by a brightly colored cotton band, and her lips were painted purple. She wore a pink dress large



enough to house a small circus” (132). Not only is this Snow White extremely large and comical, she is also mean. She constantly complains about the dwarves and forces them to take care of her, but the dwarves have a plan to pay someone to marry her and take her away from them. Of course, Connolly’s novel is for young adults, and his rendering of the classic fairytale is meant to be very comical and entertaining, especially for his younger audience. Yet, this is also a nice demonstration of how an author can surprise a reader by his or her rendering of an old tale with a new interpretation. Although the use of Snow White mainly provides humor to a sometimes rather dark story, Connolly’s novel provides a nice example of how writers can change characters to subvert the original fairytale morals and more fully develop such classic characters.

This is something that I attempted to do in “Iris” as well. Like the Snow White of the fairytales, Iris is nurturing and kind; she cares for her seven children and tries to keep their house in order, and she dreams of walking through a forest much like the one in the classic story. However, I also wanted to explore some character aspects that seemed entirely plausible for Snow White, but are never mentioned in the short, simple tale. For instance, one really interesting moment in the fairytale is when Snow White and the dwarves make an agreement that she will cook and clean for them, and they will let her live in their cottage. Of course, the dwarves are gone all day, leaving Snow White alone. Nothing much is made of this in the story, until a stranger arrives with a poisoned apple, but to me it seemed very lonely and sad. Snow White is too sweet and kind to ever say anything about it, which is why I wanted to explore more of the unhappiness, the dissatisfaction and the chaos of Iris’ story. Of course, she loves her children, but she still must deal with the frustration of taking care of them and fitting them all into the house and the loneliness of doing it while her husband is working. The story goes into a lot of modern details dealing with tubal ligation and interior decorating, and its connection to

Snow White seems to break there. Truly, Iris is much different from the title character of the fairytale; however, at its heart the story is a character exploration of a present-day, living, breathing Snow White, who can't always remain so docile. This aligns with some other new fairytale revisions as well, those who choose to create a heroine with agency rather than the typical damsel-in-distress to subvert the fairytale message. Even the Red Riding Hood black belt from *Hoodwinked!* provides a nice example of this trend.

But while Connolly and I used characters as an inspiration to create people quite different from those in the classic tales, in "The Bloody Chamber," Carter creates a character who seems just like the one from "Bluebeard." Carter's use of a character so similar to the Grimm Brothers' and Perrault's manages to fulfill a different purpose. As Smith notes:

The heroine of this tale is strangely passive and acquiescent and not, we might think, a suitable candidate for a feminist story at all, and the numerous references to Pandora show how she is locked into a patriarchal way of thinking of herself. She does not resist her husband, and literally puts her own head on the block when he commands...comparing this protagonist with those in Carter's novels or in other stories of this collection leads us to the conclusion that Carter's re-vision, rather than being a feminist re-vision that empowers the heroine as a modern woman, draws out the feminist implications of the original tale. (40).

Certainly, Carter's heroine, because of her close resemblance to the fairytale character, points out the flaws and even the utter ridiculousness of this woman who is so simple and acquiescent to her murderous husband. Though her story does not really change much, when looking at this character in a different context with Carter's emphasis on the problematic nature of her fairytale

character, the audience can begin to see the issues that come from Perrault's version of the story, which was originally meant to warn women about their curiosity.

Whether an author chooses to change and expand a character, to imagine how a real person might act in a similar situation, to give a character more psychological development and much different concerns, or whether an author chooses to remain close to their description of the fairytale character and to heighten those qualities that were already present in the tale, the portrayal of the character is extremely important. Just as in any fiction, creating characters is of a great concern; it is one of my favorite elements of writing—and in exploring those things missing from a fairytale, highlighting those things that are already present, or imagining more psychological depth and revealing the humanity of a character from a rather simple story can help us to come to an understanding of the strengths and shortcomings of these classic, popular tales. It is extremely interesting to transport these characters to different settings and time periods to see how they might react, to see if they will get fat and mean, frustrated and complaining, or if they will remain sweet and ignorant. There are so many to work with, and perhaps because so many fairytale characters seem very flat and stereotypical, there is a lot of room for the creativity and imagination of the author to work with them. Even if an author does not necessarily choose to adhere to a strict representation of a particular fairytale, beginning to write a story by thinking about a fairytale character can provide a valuable inspiration for entry into a new story.

## **Conclusion**

There are certainly problems to be acknowledged when appropriating the fairytale genre for new fictional stories. Elizabeth Wanning Harries discusses this particular subject in her book

*Twice Told Tales: Women Writers and the History of the Fairytale*. There are historical issues in examining those fairytales which are considered to be represented by a tradition of oral culture when those we think of as original “fairy tales have always been deeply affected by the practices of writing—and never existed in anything like their present form until long after the invention of print” (Harries 4). This is not to mention the “restricted list of fairytales” that are still popular in society, a canon which does not necessarily include many interesting and important tales. There are many other fairytales that are not the products of Grimm or Perrault may still provide an intriguing entry for the writer, and just as some of the examples here demonstrate, it is not necessary to adhere to every element of the fairytale genre to successfully incorporate a fairytale intertext in a fiction story.

However, one of the reasons it can be so beneficial to examine, revise, and subvert these classic popular tales is *because* of their extreme popularity. When a generation has grown up with a view of a tale as only perceived by Disney, the genre needs new versions to respond to those that are now considered rather standard. All of the examples I have used here are rather popular because of their presence in the media, which is why they are important to consider. There are many things to be creatively explored in terms of voice, imagery, theme, and character, even in those tales that have been perpetually reimagined. The fairytale has a particular hold over our society and culture, one that can be channeled for a creative function for the modern writer.

Jack Zipes summarizes this best in *Why Fairy Tales Stick: The Evolution and Relevance of a Genre*. He claims the fairy tale:

is a strange viral genre because it contains positive and negative effects in the socialization processes. As it has evolved and spread, it acts like a meme that undergoes multiple mutations in interaction with the environment. It is encoded and carries relevant

information that enables us to know the world and uses this information to both expose and conceal the problematic nature of social relations. It is perhaps this tension between disclosure and closure with the metaphoric conventions of the genre that make it so viable as an appealing form of communication and narration. (94)

This fascinating dynamic of the fairytale genre is what makes it so useful to a modern writer.

While the classic fairytale conventions and plots may be familiar, the way the context of the world inhabits the tale and expresses itself in the author's revisions constantly regenerates the stories of the past and enhances or subverts multiple complexities of the tale. Just as the world continues to change and grow, we must develop fairytales and stories that reflect the significant elements of our social and historical moment. Further, we must interrogate those aspects of the fairytale that resist this change and write stories that reveal those shortcomings.

## Chapter 1: Circus

Peter ties his shoe again, a loop, then around, then pulling tight. “Did it,” he says, and Mother glances back at him with a small smile. Peter sighs and yanks the string until the knot is undone and begins the process all over, a loop, then around, then pulling tight. His body shifts back and forth in his seat, the seatbelt gripping his chest as Father turns the steering wheel to the left and to the right, around the bend, holding tight.

“Elephants?” Peter asks, and Mother nods absently, her eyes drooping, and Peter remembers what it was like to see her cry. He feels like crying now, but he will not because today is the first happy day when he gets to be all alone with Mother and Father. Aunt Ann wanted to come too, but Peter said no because even though he likes Aunt Ann, she won’t stop asking him what color things are, how many fingers old he is—even though he is now a whole hand—and what order the ABC’s go in.

Peter has just finished tying the left when Father stops the car. They all get out, but Peter wants to cry again because he has stepped into a big mud puddle and his perfect shoe string bows are soggy and murky brown. Mother promises to wash them at home as she grips Peter’s hand, and they walk swinging their arms.

“Tigers?” Peter asks.

“Most likely,” Father answers, and he grips Peter’s other hand, and Peter wonders why they are holding him so tight.

The flowers on Mother’s dress look almost real in the sunlight, like fluttering petals. Sometimes Peter touches them just to make sure that they are fake, that they aren’t silky and fragile, that the sturdy fabric of the dress will shield his mother from the wind.

“Will Alex be there?” Peter asks, and Mother stops walking. Father and Peter have to stop too because they are all chain-linked together, and Mother has hit the brakes hard with her shoes in the mud. Peter’s arms stop swinging. He wiggles his feet so he won’t keep sinking.

“No, Alex won’t be there, remember?” Father is leaning down and holding Peter’s hand even tighter. Peter nods because he does remember. He just doesn’t know why his brother won’t be there. They all move along together again.

The red and white tent erupts suddenly from a valley in the fleshy plain. The sides of it flap in the wind, and Peter hesitates for a moment but Father urges him forward. “Don’t worry,” he says. Peter says he wants a candy cane, and Mother squeezes his hand.

There are small stands with blinking lights around the tent with men inside them calling for everyone around to taste delicious treats. Peter’s mouth waters at the sight of peanut shells and popcorn kernels blanketing the ground. Father buys him a box of popcorn and then even lets him pick out a lollipop. Peter picks orange because it looks the happiest of all of the lollipops. He holds it up to Mother and promises her a lick, but she does not look orange. She looks, as Aunt Ann says, rather blue.

Father gives tickets to a man in a funny hat, and then the three of them hold hands again to enter the tent. It’s hard for Peter to hold Father’s hand because he’s still holding the big lollipop and doesn’t want to get himself all sticky. Upon seeing the inside of the tent, though, Peter forgets about the sticky orange and gapes at all of the people in the stands. They are smiling with big mouths, teeth all over the place. A band plays music off to the side, and the large cymbals remind Peter of Mother’s favorite earrings. A man in red swings his arm back and forth beating the big drum. Mother sits Peter on her lap and kisses the back of his head. It smells like candy and sweets and manure and dirt.

“Elephants?” Peter asks.

“Soon,” Father says, and as he does a little man comes out and yells, and sparkly people begin to parade around the center of the tent with beautiful, terrifying creatures. Peter claps along with the rest of the audience, imagining riding along on the camel’s back or flapping the elephant’s ear. He clings to Mother as the lion passes by who leaves large paw prints in the dust right before them. The small man cracks his whip gleefully. Peter knows that Alex would not be afraid of the lion so he tries to be brave. Sometimes Peter likes to pretend that he is actually his big brother.

Around and around they go like a real-life carousel, and Peter yanks Father’s shirt and points to all the best animals.

Ladies in fancy costumes ride around on horses, and they look for brief moments as if they might fall off, but they never do. Peter gasps and sways back and forth on Mother’s lap as the riders dash around the ring.

“Aren’t they lovely?” Mother says, and Peter doesn’t know if she means the horses or the ladies, but he thinks the answer must be yes.

Then tightrope walkers on ropes that seem to be millions of feet in the air cross from one side of the ring to the other, and Peter clenches his fist as if he can hold them in place. He thinks that he must find a way to try this in the backyard. Maybe if he rolled up the hammock?

“Want some?” Peter asks Mother holding out the lollipop. Mother smiles and shakes her head. Peter doesn’t know why she smiles, but it makes him want to smile too.

“God, they’re brilliant,” Father whispers. The tightrope walkers tip toe back and forth, balancing in the air.

There is a drum roll before the little man announces the next part, the “Amazing Flying Marietta,” and then trumpets blast as a woman soars through the tent. She’s a real acrobat, and



Peter claps the hardest for her because she looks a little like Aunt Ann. “And the Magical Manzioli,” the little man booms. A man with the biggest muscles Peter has ever seen catches Marietta by the wrists, and together they swing back and forth, flying across the tent. Marietta swings back to her own bar, upside down, twirling through the air. Mother claps until her hands turn pink, and Father beams as Manzioli catches Marietta again. Peter wants to tell Alex every detail, but he remembers something about how he can’t.

Peter claps harder as Marietta flies above them, her tight red costume sparkling. He can’t tell for sure but he thinks she must be smiling as Manzioli flips her through the air again. They are sprawled over the breathless crowd. Marietta is beaming at her audience, and Peter thinks she must see him gaping at her, a red figure bending through the air. He forgets all about the elephants and tigers. This is the part that he will remember.

She begins to fly back through the sky, and Peter wants to stay here forever, admiring how she soars above him almost as if by magic. He’s thankful that Mother and Father like her too, that they are taking it all in with him.

But then it happens. Peter stares, enamored, his stomach twisting in a tight knot. Marietta’s foot just misses the bar, and she starts falling, falling, falling. The band stops playing, and he feels Mother gasp, but he can’t take his eyes from the woman sailing through the air, the sparkles in her dress catching the light as she tears through the sky. She’s so bright and spectacular. It’s the best show he will ever see, and God, it’s so brilliant and lovely.

## Chapter 2: The Beast You've Made of Me

About twenty miles from the Georgia-Florida border, Claudia said she just couldn't wait any longer to pee. My accommodating father pulled our SUV into the next rest-stop parking lot and shut off the engine.

"You better go too, Maryanne, so we don't have to stop again," he said to me.

"It's too hot to go out there."

"You'll survive, I'm sure."

I climbed out of the car and followed my stepsister to the women's restroom, the smell of sweat and urine pushing us back as she flung open the door.

"So nasty," Claudia complained. "I shouldn't have had that extra soda." She pinched her nose shut with the tips of her fingers and went into a stall. When we met again at the sink, I was surprised that she remained to brush her hair in front of the mirror. Mine too was fuzzy from the humidity, but it didn't matter. I left Claudia there without a word, desperate to return to the air-conditioning.

In the parking lot, my father and stepmother stood together to one side of the car, oblivious to the wretched heat and to the fact that I was approaching. I stopped short when they started kissing, their lips pushed together, bodies close. I could see Sandy's flesh peeking out from under her shirt. My father's hand reached for the exposed sweat rolling down her stomach; the hand slid up her side to a point no longer visible, but I could imagine his fingertips pressed against her skin, hers gliding up and down his back. My father leaned his new bride up against the car, continuing to explore her, nuzzling her neck, his face buried in her hair.

"What are you waiting for?" Claudia asked, knocking me off of the curb and marching past me to climb into the car. "Lets go, love birds!" she shouted.

Our parents parted, smiling, their eyes lingering on each other as they got in the car and put on their seatbelts. My father turned the key in the ignition, and for a moment Sandy placed her hand on his knee before leaning to look out the window.

“Almost in Florida,” Sandy said cheerfully, as if nothing at all had happened.

It was nice to finally have that wonderful feeling of being alone, to escape from the claustrophobic car, to pull away from the crowded shore and into the deep waves of the ocean, beyond the reach of screaming children who could only go so far on their tip toes, desperately trying to keep their heads above water. But I could still see our umbrella blooming out of the sand in the distance, its pink and yellow stripes casting shade over our beach chairs and the cooler that we had dragged from the hotel that morning. I imagined Claudia right where I left her, laid out just inches from the reach of the umbrella’s shade, languidly sipping Diet Coke from a straw and letting the sun sink into her skin.

The ends of my fingers were wrinkled, my muscles beginning to ache from the strain of the tumbling waves, but I hesitated to return to the hot sand on the beach. Only when I noticed the sun like a fire on my skin and imagined the bright, painful red I might become did I decide to make my way back to that shaded spot in the distance.

I couldn’t tell if Claudia saw me coming in her huge, bug-eyed glasses, a copy of the latest issue of *Cosmopolitan* open on her lap. But of course, she was completely aware of her surroundings in case any semi-attractive teenage boys were lurking around.

“God, Maryanne, do you have that thing like triple-knotted?” she spat.

I continued tugging at the strings of the borrowed red bikini, but could not seem to find a way to make it cover anymore of my body.

“I’m surprised to find you alone,” I said, pulling a bottle of water from the cooler.

“Actually, I just sent my new friend Jeremy to fetch his little brother for you. We’re going to hang out with them this afternoon.”

“Claud—”

“Don’t be such a baby, Maryanne.” She smiled showing all of her teeth. “Anyway, Mom and Dave will be at the conference all day, and wasn’t our whole goal of this vacation to get you kissed?”

“*Your* goal maybe.”

“I’d like to know how you ended up such a prude.”

“You’re turning pink,” I said, imagining her opinions about me, Maryanne who never had a mother, who didn’t know how to be a woman, who needed to be taught about boys and sex and red bikini’s from this benevolent and experienced seductress.

“Time to flip!” Claudia wriggled onto her stomach and began to read sex tips aloud.

When we walked down the beach with the boys, I tried to be casual, though my legs were already wobbling through the sand. When a whispered conversation with Claudia revealed that Jeremy was at least twenty-one and his brother was an as-yet-undetermined “probably younger,” I started to stutter from anxiety.

“You’re only seventeen,” I said to my stepsister.

“Thanks for the reminder,” she laughed at me, and walked away.

Claudia kept tossing her hair around in different directions as if begging someone to climb it up to her lips, to take shelter under her waves of well-conditioned beauty. I was quiet, unable to follow Claudia’s confident banter, my arms folded tightly across my chest.

I couldn't help the fact that I was what Claudia often referred to as a super freak show, maybe because while the rest of the sophomore class of Redmont High School was out discovering alcohol and oral sex, I was reading every book that I could get my hands on, books about wars and science and human physiology. In fact, the only awareness I had about the human body came from either textbooks or the raunchier novels that I happened upon. For that reason, I was still having trouble equating the phrase "quivering member" with actual scientific processes of male genitalia, or reconciling the science of erections and ejaculation with passion and desire. I was positive that it was something that Claudia could explain to me in detail, but I would never ask her about it, even as she continued to offer the knowledge of teen magazines without my consent. I could not imagine any other fifteen year old being as positively inept in the social world as I was, but I had never really cared until Claudia came along to show me my devastating flaws.

Jeremy and Claudia walked up the beach, already playfully touching, nudging each other. Jake lingered beside me despite my awkward attempts at conversation and bug-eyed nervousness, and I was forced to look at him, to determine that he actually was what I imagined to be considerably handsome. His face and body were proportionate, his eyes a sharp blue, and his teeth looked as though they had been mechanically straightened and were brushed frequently with fluoride toothpaste. I supposed that it would not be illogical to be attracted to him. And when his sharp blue eyes were moving around in his head, rolling over every inch of my skin, I thought that I should probably be flattered. No one had ever told me that I was pretty, but Jake was very open about his opinion.

"You have such big eyes," he said. But I couldn't help feeling insecure, especially as I was wearing what was probably the least amount of clothing I had ever worn in public.

I could hear Claudia laughing sweetly up ahead, a master of the art of flirtation. I didn't know if reading every issue of *Cosmo* would somehow enable me to do this as well or if it was some kind of skill you just had to be born with. Claudia was certainly born with something else, considering the way that she popped out of her string bikini, but there was more to it than that. She was a social queen, and in school she had barely acknowledged me when I said hi to her in the hallways. People who didn't even know her knew all about her, and she didn't want them to know that we were related, even if it wasn't by blood.

But to give her credit, I must say that Claudia had been my best friend since the beginning of that summer, always there to tell me what to wear or how to fix my eyeliner, or to update me on the latest episodes of *The Real Housewives* or *The Bachelor*, except for when she was off with her actual friends, the ones that already knew that black and blue could only be worn together in very specific circumstances.

"Tell me about yourself," Jake said.

"What do you want to know?"

"Where are you from?"

"Ohio, a small town in the middle of nowhere."

He smiled. "I'm from nowhere too, but mine's in Kentucky. Are you on vacation?"

I cleared my throat in hopes of getting out my sentences clearly. "Well, kind of," I stuttered. "My dad and step-mom are at a conference nearby. And when it's over we are going to visit my grandmother in Tallahassee."

He was interested, or at least he pretended to be, so I continued to answer his questions. Yes, I had been to Florida plenty of times, no, never to Panama, yes, my grandmother was wonderful. She made these really warm quilts that made you want to curl up inside of them

forever. She also made the best creamy butter cookies and told stories about love and war and magic. Jake said he had never known either of his grandmothers. I let him hold my hand. Claudia seemed to be getting further away. My stomach growled.

“Hungry?” he said.

“I should get Claudia. We need to go up for dinner.”

“I hope we’ll see you tonight. How long are you staying here?”

“Only through Saturday.”

I realized later I hadn’t asked him anything about his family or why he was in Florida or how old he was or what he was doing with his life, but as Claudia told me in the hotel room, none of that was really important.

“He’s cute,” she said. “And for our purposes, that’s all that matters.”

Our parents had stopped into the hotel room for a brief hello before returning to the conference to hear the keynote speaker and then to booze it up with their colleagues. When Claudia told them that we would just stay in that night and watch a movie, maybe even go for ice cream, I almost believed her.

The boys were at our door before long, still in their damp swim trunks. They brought drinks, and for fear of Claudia’s scolding I had sipped away at a water bottle of vodka and soda. It tasted the way that rubbing alcohol smelled on my skin when I was bleeding.

“Don’t like it?” Jake asked. He had his hand on my knee.

“It’s fine.” I smiled, and drank faster to prove the point.

Before long, my body felt tingly, and I couldn’t help but stare at my step-sister, casually sprawled across her hotel bed with Jeremy at her feet, sometimes leaning up to touch him on the

arm and whisper in his ear. I looked at Jake's arm resting on the end of the bed as he leaned toward me from the desk chair. I thought about touching it lightly, but it seemed too hairy.

"Be nice to him, Maryanne," Claudia had said to me as she pressed the tip of her dark red lipstick to my mouth before the boys arrived. "Have you ever even liked a boy?"

"I don't know," I answered, although, I guess really I had. A boy in my math class, Sam, who was on what Claudia called the middle tier of popularity, certainly beyond my reach, but not quite on the highest echelon where she roamed. He was nice and smart, and he even spoke to me sometimes when he had nothing better to do. And though I knew almost nothing about him, I couldn't help staring at the blonde lock of hair that would fall across his forehead or the soft lines around his eyes when he would smile, or the little dimples that formed in his cheeks. It was just a crush really, but the only one I had ever had.

I thought about Sam as I sat with Jake. It seemed a natural line of logic for my brain. Jake was smiling. There were hardly any lines in his face and no dimples. It made the smile look almost unreal.

"I like that red bikini you were wearing," he said, and suddenly I felt naked.

"It's Claudia's," I hiccupped, as if that would make the creamy skin he was stroking belong to my stepsister as well.

He nuzzled me, nabbing my waist in his paws and pulling me closer.

"You're so cute," he purred. His lips grazed my neck; I could feel his teeth against my skin, and I shifted away from him. I glanced to the other bed, but Claudia and Jeremy were facing the opposite direction.

"I just want to kiss you, Maryanne," Jake said, leaning his face toward me, soon so close to me that I reluctantly gave in. He bit at my lips, his mouth eating mine, and I sat there thinking



only that if this was really how kissing was supposed to be that I did not understand Claudia's infatuation with it. I wanted to spit his tongue out of my mouth, to tell him that he was a horrible kisser. According to Claudia, boys need to hear that sometimes from girls they will never see again.

When I pulled away from him he had Claudia's lipstick on his face.

"You're so sweet and innocent," Jake said. "You don't know how it's driving me wild."

I grunted, unsure of what to say to that. Of course I was innocent and inexperienced, but it certainly wasn't for his benefit or pleasure.

"We're going to get more ice," Claudia giggled ferociously as she and Jeremy went out the door. My stepsister wasn't the smartest person I knew, but I had never seen her act like such an airhead before.

And then I was alone with a boy in a hotel room, a situation I had never expected. I sipped my drink through tense, freshly kissed lips. Jake only stared at me, hard, as if he was expecting something to happen.

"Want to see what's on TV?" I asked.

"No. I just want to watch you," he said.

He crawled toward me on the bed and ran his fingers through my hair.

"What is it?" I asked and he kissed me again as if he was trying to swallow me whole. I counted the seconds until my stepsister would fling the door open, forcing him to pull away.

The boys were long gone by the time my father and his wife stumbled into the dark room. Claudia was sound asleep, breathing heavily, but I was awake in the bed listening to their movements, to their stifled laughter.

“Want to go out to breakfast tomorrow?” my father asked Sandy.

“No,” she whispered. “Room service. Let’s stay in bed all day.” The water in the bathroom was running. I heard them shuffle around in their suitcases and brush their teeth. I watched their shadows climb under the blankets, and then they were quiet. They were in the same spot, their arms around each other, when Claudia and I left for the beach the next morning. We had crept around the room so as not to wake them up, Claudia upset with me because I couldn’t find my book, but I wouldn’t leave without it.

Unfortunately, Jake and Jeremy found us in the sand before too long, and I was forced to abandon my book entirely.

“Hey, beautiful,” Jake said.

I was distracted by the high-pitched giggle from Claudia.

“How are you?”

I watched my stepsister become the girl I didn’t know, the one who needed assistance getting up from her seat, who kept hurling insincere compliments at another person.

“Maryanne?” Jake said. “What are you looking at?”

“Jeremy, you’re so funny!” from Claudia.

“Let’s go in the water,” Jake said, and he took me by the hand and dragged me along behind him.

When the waves pushed us together, I tried to resist. I kicked my legs to fight the current, but my body kept knocking into Jake’s. I would sometimes jump, terrified, thinking that a fish had rubbed against my leg only to find that it was actually Jake’s hand swimming through the water. Once he caught me in his arms and didn’t let go. He kissed me again and again, though I

never moved my mouth. I was stuck with him, and according to Claudia I was supposed to be enjoying it. He wanted me, and wasn't that the most spectacular thing that had ever happened?

He asked me for my phone number when we said goodbye, and I gave it to him, unwilling but unsure of how to even say "no."

"I'm so glad I got to meet you, Maryanne," he said looking me over, his eyes almost glowing. As soon as he was gone I went to find something to wash the taste of him from my mouth.

Tallahassee was rainy and uncharacteristically cold. I spent my time there wrapped in my grandmother's quilts listening to her stories, or reading books when her voice was hoarse from talking. Claudia was restless from being stuck inside without anyone to talk to but an old woman she hardly knew and me. She hovered over me, jumping with excitement when my cell phone would ring, Jake's number displayed on the screen.

"If you don't answer, Maryanne, I am going to."

"Why don't you occupy yourself and call Jeremy?" I asked.

Claudia paused. "That was just a fling I guess."

She kept checking her phone.

"He hasn't called?"

"Jake's calling! Answer it. You need the practice."

I did answer once, nervous but buckling under my stepsister's pressure. Jake sounded the same as I remembered, and we spoke about school and family until he asked me what I was wearing, and I told him I had to go. "At least tell me a color," he begged.

"Red," I said before hanging up.

Claudia's eyes stabbed at me from over her magazine. "We really are moving in the tiniest baby steps," she grumbled.

And then our parents, always trying to dash off to get some alone time, kept leaving us with Grandma at the house. To me, it was better to be away from them than to occasionally interrupt the inappropriate placement of their hands. Claudia, on the other hand, was desperate for what she called some "real human interaction with someone who had something to talk about other than the Great Depression or WWII." Probably for the first time since I had known her, I was more comfortable than Claudia, completely at ease when our parents were gone, shielded from the world in an environment where I felt at home. I started reading one of my Grandma's old novels, a historical romance, the leading man a total rogue until he falls in love with a beautiful woman. At the scene on a balcony, when he kisses her for the first time, I thought of Jake's lips on mine, remembering the awkwardness and the saliva. That did not seem to be what it was like in Grandma's book. *That* was still something completely foreign to me, something that I knew must exist from the way that my father kissed Claudia's mom, from the way that Grandma talked about Grandpa. It made me think of Sam and the way that he scooted his desk over to mine and asked how my math problems were going.

But still Jake called. My phone always seemed to be ringing, though that's probably just because I had hardly ever in my life heard it ring before that week. Usually it would just ring and then stop, nothing but silence, the end of that failed attempt to contact me, but then I returned from grocery shopping with my grandmother to find that I had a voicemail. It was from him of course.

I was motionless as the automated voice spoke his phone number. I was unsure of what to expect, if he would be angry that I wasn't answering his calls, if he would plead with me like he

had when he asked to kiss me, if he would be forceful or sweet or funny. Why was he leaving me a voicemail? For a moment there was only silence. And then suddenly, there was a faint ruffling. I was surprised, listening with every nerve ending. It seemed like there was a struggle on the other end of the line, and then there was gasping, a desperate intake of breath. I panicked as if he was truly suffocating, as if he had almost drowned.

And then he said my name. He moaned it softly at first, and I could imagine his blue eyes rolling into the back of his head, my name bubbling from between his pink lips. *Maryanne, Maryanne*. Over and over again until my head was hurting from the phone pressed against my ear, and he was screaming it violently like he was in powerful and wonderful agony. He was howling it as if calling to the moon, restless and wild, forcefully and desperately, though he would receive no response.

Finally he was done, and my phone asked me what I wanted to do next. I threw it on the bed, and left the room.

Ohio seemed different to me when we returned. Or maybe it was just too much the same, too naïve and innocent compared to the turmoil inside of me. I felt as though I had been poisoned, and unsure of how to suck the venom from my wound, I decided to do all of those things that I had seen people do in movies when they were trying to change their lives. I dyed my hair, a midnight black color that somehow made me feel more powerful. I bought new clothes, dresses without bows or frills, boots that meant business. Claudia was completely taken aback when she saw that I was making conscious fashion decisions, and without her help, but she approved of my new look. I think that perhaps that is when she first started to really respect me,

when she saw that I wasn't totally helpless. Jake kept calling until I figured out how to block a number on my phone.

By the time of the back-to-school bonfire, Claudia wasn't even embarrassed to arrive with me by her side. She said this "dark brooding thing" was totally working for me though she didn't know what had triggered it. I told her that Jake had just stopped trying to contact me, that he must have lost interest, though I knew it was the furthest thing from the truth. I had nightmares that he would somehow find me and leave more than a voicemail implanted in my brain. Claud was certainly disappointed about the ceased interaction but said that really he was only for practice; there were much bigger and better things to come. I tried to question her about what happened to Jeremy, but she brushed it aside. "That meant nothing, Maryanne, obviously," she told me.

My father came back to my room when I was putting on make-up for the bonfire.

"Should I be worried about you?" he asked.

"I think for the first time you don't have to be worried about me."

"I don't know what the means, but I know you're smart, and I trust you if you say everything is okay."

I had been avoiding him, in some ways haunted by the accidental encounters where I'd seen him cupping my stepmother's flesh in his hands. But then once when I lingered there looking at them instead of running off disgusted, I noticed something about the way that Sandy smiled, happily allowing his foreign fingers to roam underneath her clothes. It was fascinating to me. When I saw her push her tongue into his ear I started to pay more attention.

I wandered around the bonfire, people that I had gone to school with for years barely recognizing me, staring, boys open-mouthed. I knew what they were all thinking. I wasn't going

to let them kiss me or call me or touch me. I was going to be the one in control. I was going to be strong and intelligent. I was going to do what I wanted.

Claudia was on the other side of the flames surrounded by people. She saw me watching her and smiled. She signaled for me to come over to her, to stand beside her publicly. I turned away to move out of the crowd, to the edge of the party.

When I found Sam, I sauntered over to him and tapped him on the shoulder. He looked at me for a moment, confused. “Maryanne?” he asked.

I took him by the hand and dragged him into the woods, away from all of the people. I pressed him against a tree and kissed him because it was what I wanted to do. There were no fireworks or birds singing or spells broken, it wasn’t like a kiss on a balcony in a romance novel, but it was satisfying. I licked my lips with anticipation. I clawed at him with my fingernails and pressed my teeth against his flesh. I didn’t care if I ever kissed him again, I didn’t care what he thought of me or what anyone else wanted of me. He was mine in that moment.

“God, Maryanne, are you drunk?” Sam asked.

I tried to read his tone. Was he happy, did he want something to happen? Did it really matter all that much either way?

“No, of course I’m not drunk.”

He put his hand on my side, but I smacked it away quickly. It was going to be on my terms.

“What is it?” he stuttered, his eyes wide and doe-like, his voice cracking on the last word.

I ran my fingers through his hair and pulled him closer to me. I touched my lips to his again softly and then smiled showing all of my teeth.

“Full moon tonight,” I laughed before taking his hand and pulling him deeper into the forest, far away from any sign of the path.



### Chapter 3: The Island

Peter flies across the nursery, sword in hand, chasing after Alex. It's not Real Brother Alex, of course, because he died a year ago; it's Imaginary Friend Alex who Peter plays with daily. Almost every day they play pirates, but they often switch places. Like today Alex is the pirate and Peter is the naval officer trying to catch him. Peter thinks that tomorrow he may be a fellow pirate. Sometimes they switch places so much that Peter plays Alex and calls his imaginary friend Peter. Imaginary Friend Peter loves to walk the plank.

When Mother calls that dinner is ready, they do not hear because today they are orphans as well. Most of the time they are orphans because it doesn't take a lot of playing. When Peter went to find Mother in the morning, she refused to get out of bed. Imagining Alex is enough, and Peter doesn't want to strain himself too much.

"Get back, you scoundrel," Peter yells, and he slashes his sword through the air, almost hitting his imaginary brother. Mother calls again from the kitchen, but she doesn't even say his name, and no one hears. Alex jumps on the bed and then over to the window. Peter tells him to stop it, that he is nervous that he will fall.

"It's okay, you baby," Alex says, and he stabs Peter in the chest with a dagger. Peter collapses to the ground while Alex laughs. "I am the best and most horrible pirate captain there ever was or ever will be," he says right before Mother walks into the room.

"I've been calling you," Mother says, but Peter does not hear because he is an orphan today, and now he is dead, dead, dead. Mother gasps at the sight of him.

She leaves the room quickly, without even bothering to wait for Peter to come back to life. He is not in fact dead; he is dressed in Alex's old clothes and has washed up on the shore of the nursery. He and Imaginary Alex are marooned on an island. Of course, as most anyone can

tell you, the first and most important thing that to do when only barely alive on a deserted island is to locate some fresh drinking water. Luckily, unfinished glasses are lined up on the dresser, a miraculous stream that is able to provide him nourishment. Peter then searches for some food, but isn't quite as fortunate. He puts his hope in Imaginary Alex, who suggests going out to search in different directions. He sends Peter toward the bed as he goes off alone to the window. Peter is cautious, aware of the possibility that the island may hold unimaginable dangers; he just misses a pool of quicksand that he almost mistook for a rug. Despite his best efforts, he cannot find any food, not a coconut, not a berry, not a crumb. He decides to retrace his steps to see if his brother has had better luck.

However, when Peter returns to the meeting point, Blanket Mountain, Alex isn't there. Peter waits, patiently, hoping that Alex found something and he is just trying to find a way to bring it back with him. But when Alex doesn't come back for what seems like ages Peter assumes the worst. He imagines his body careening down a waterfall, or inside the belly of a crocodile, or poisoned by a dreadful plant. He goes to look for him, but only finds traces: Alex's favorite shirt, a sock, sparse bits of a boy that his brother seems to have left behind in a haunting trail.

Peter begins to spot wild animals, colorful birds watching him from the tops of trees, cat-like shadows stalking him at a distance, crocodiles popping their eyes up from muddy pools of water. Peter considers trying to make some kind of boat but he fears the things that lie out in and beyond the water even more than the wildlife of the island. This is where he lost his brother, and this is where he must stay in case Alex returns. He sprawls himself out over Blanket Mountain.

Peter yawns. He knows that Alex cannot make it back, and Peter is unable to save him. The revelation hits him that he is all alone on the island, all alone in the world. Soon he gives up

on the search for food; he decides it will be simple enough to waste away. He doubts that anyone is even still searching for him. He spends his time lying on his stomach in the forest, sipping water from the stream and imagining what it would be like to have a mother until it's time for a nap.

Peter wakes up groggy and hungry, too tired for pretending, but he wanders around the house alone opening cabinets and closets, looking for something to occupy himself before he feels tired enough to fall asleep again. He likes the rhythm, open and close, the sounds of the creaking doors and wood slamming against wood. It's gotten dark out, but Peter doesn't bother to turn on any lights; the slivers of the moon shining through the windows are enough for him to find his way from the living room to the kitchen to the dining room.

Then, upon opening the door to the little den, he finds his mother sitting in a rocking chair. He's surprised because she rarely leaves her bedroom except for meals, but he uses the opportunity to take a good look at her for the first time in a long time, to allow her to be real again if only for a moment. He goes to her, his head bowed as if he is approaching a queen. She smiles, just a small twitch of her lips as she rocks back and forth. Peter doesn't know what she is seeing, she isn't even looking at him, but he slowly gets closer and closer.

"Mother?" Peter says, almost afraid of her in this state. It's been so long since they have spoken, since he has let himself accept her as his mother at all. She seems to be in a trance, but she stares at him, then runs her fingers through his hair like she used to when he was just growing his first locks. She pulls him up into her lap and kisses the back of his head.

"Alex?" she whispers, and Peter stops moving. He searches her face for some sign of how to react.

“Yes,” he says finally. “Yes, I’m here, mother,” and she rocks him in her arms until he is far too tired to keep pretending.

## Chapter 4: Like a Terrible Fish

So that's it. I am walking out the door with the junk that has managed to collect itself into stacks on my tiny desk throughout the years. There were some squished stress balls, a copy of one of my first company reports; I even found some old pictures of Andrew and me, one of us on our honeymoon wearing Hawaiian shirts and hula skirts. I had forgotten about that night at the bonfire until today when I started dumping things into the trash, getting down to the solid wood under a mass of papers. And there, I found myself almost twenty years ago, with a giant smile on my unwrinkled face, holding hands with the love of my life. The picture was a bit sticky from spilt coffee and stuck to an old napkin. I kept it anyway.

My boss has apologized profusely because it's not me after all, "it's the economy." The economy has decided that I should no longer have a job at Howard & Sons apparently, though Vicki Prescott, that skank from HR gets to strut around with 5 inches of poofy hair over her incompetent brain.

"I'm so sorry to hear about the lay-off," she says to me squeakily as I haul my things through the glass door.

"Thanks, Vick," I say with a smile, ignoring the bubblegum pink lipstick smudged on her teeth. I'm a real peach about it all. I bite my tongue as she clacks away in her leopard-print heels.

"You'll be sorry!" I want to shout back as I walk across the parking lot, but probably they won't be. Probably they will be perfectly content and forget all about the scrawny brunette that used to sit between Ralph and Nancy. "What was her name?" they'll ask Nancy, "it's been bugging us all day." If anyone would know, it would be Nancy.

"You know, I just can't quite recall," she'll say sweetly.

I drive home after picking up some groceries. I march around the house putting things away and humming a song. I can't remember what it's called; I can't even remember the words. It's stuck in my head, but then it's gone. I feed the cat. I snap the tags off of the apron that I just bought and pop open a bottle of wine. I am officially a housewife I say to myself. Hoorah and a few sips straight from the bottle until I locate a glass.

The lasagna is burnt by the time that Andrew walks through the door. "And what are you up to in here?" he asks. His eyebrows are raised and he must smell the lingering smoke.

"Well I tried," I say.

He snorts. "Doesn't look like that was quite enough."

I throw the whole pan into the trash and whip off the apron. He catches me as I stumble forward. Somehow I've ended up on my second bottle of wine.

"I've retired," I slur, the kitchen wallpaper spinning around my head.

"You're 38."

"You're a genius with numbers." My knees are buckling beneath me, and Andrew starts to drag me to the couch.

"You're a wonder, Catherine," he says, and then I am out.

I wake up with my face pressed to a cushion and my head pounding. When I finally manage to crack open my eyes I find that the clock says 9:00 and I think I must be late but then I remember that I have nothing to be late for. There is a note on the fridge from Andrew. "Take some Asprin. I've left the paper so you can look for jobs."

I let out a little growl. Of course Andrew would already be preparing me for the next step in life. He's like a boy scout decorated in life achievement patches. But then again, maybe he

doesn't want to be the only thing that I have left. Maybe we are both afraid that somehow he will be a disappointment.

My joints feel stiff and achy so I drop into the sofa. I fall back asleep until I wake up. I watch TV. I hated that job at Howard. I was on the brink of quitting, but before I could, they decided that I wasn't so worthwhile after all.

Andrew comes home early. He says it's to check on me.

"I heard all about the layoffs," he says. "But you have nothing to worry about, really. I'm sure you'll find something else soon. Or even if you didn't want to I make plenty of money at the firm. You could stay at home and we could try again--"

"I'm not having a baby," I say. "I told you."

"But maybe if you changed your mind..."

"I'm sorry, Andrew." I can tell he doesn't believe me, but I am. "I'm just not sure. And that's something you should be sure about."

"You said that, I know. But you used to talk about having children. I thought it was something you wanted."

"I thought so too," I say, but I don't feel as if I've ever changed my mind. And I can't help but wonder if Andrew only wants a baby so that there is someone else in this house. "Hey, what if you stayed home for the rest of the week, and we just hung out with each other?" I feel as if maybe I should punch his shoulder, a gesture that we are buddies, teammates.

"I know its hard losing your job, Cath, and I wish I could, but there's so much going on this week."

"Right."

"You know what we should do though? Plan a vacation. Soon. Before you have a new job."

"Yes, that's a nice thought." I remember the honeymoon picture in my purse, and it's hard to imagine that anything could be the same.

"Well, why don't you start looking up some places?"

He starts to walk out the door.

"Andrew, I love you," I say, and I can hear the desperation in my voice.

"I love you too," he says, but then he's gone.

I pretend that I am looking for jobs. I dress up in nice outfits, and I leave the house, then go to Wal-Mart and buy some cat food or nail polish or gum. I tell Andrew that I am still hopeful and that I think my interviews went well, and he smiles, reassured that soon our life will be back to normal, and I'll be just as busy and distracted as he is all of the time. Perhaps I hope this as well, but another job that means nothing to me does not seem to be the answer.

The ladies from my bridge club call to check up on me, to say that their husband works at this place or that, maybe they could get me a meeting with someone. They are all housewives, but they have children and important things to worry about. They have things that matter to them other than soap operas and talk shows. I thank them, but I don't take any meetings. I wish that I could talk to them, but they all seem so perfectly put together. I wouldn't know how to talk to them about something messy unless there was some club soda on hand to clean it up.

When Mary calls, I am in the kitchen mopping, pretending that I am Cinderella, that I am on the brink of my fairytale ending, an ending that means something more than just having Prince Charming. If anyone could shatter those delusions, it would be Mary, the leader of the



neighborhood pack. She is years older than me, the one who devised the idea of a bridge club and dictates the social order of the neighborhood—where we will get together, who will bake what, who will take care of the young children—things that I admittedly knew nothing about before she decide to befriend me.

“Hello, Catherine, dear. Now that you are not working,” she says the last two words in a sympathetic whisper, “I could use some help from you. You aren’t too completely busy, I presume.” She lets out a little laugh.

“What do you need, Mary?” I ask, almost frightened.

“Well since Rebecca has gotten the lead in the Christmas play, I volunteered to make the costumes. It is a great amount of work though, not that I couldn’t handle it, but I thought maybe you would like to help.”

“Well, Mary, I’ve been so busy with all of the interviews and everything, I don’t think I could find the time.”

“Oh,” she says. I imagine her pursed lips on the other line, just like they were when she tasted my baked brie the last time I hosted the bridge club.

“You didn’t even go to the interview that I set up for you, Catherine.”

She scolds me like a parent scolds a child, and I feel small and determined to make her understand. Perhaps she could be my fairy godmother, help me figure out what on earth I am doing. Where the hell is the ball, Mary?

“The job wasn’t quite what I’m looking for,” I say, but she quickly changes the subject.

It gets cold, and I start to stay in my pajamas. I sit on the couch and watch Christmas movies with the cat and a cup of hot chocolate. I’ve been losing track of time lately, but I know

that today is somewhere toward the middle of this week. I decide to check the mail, and I find that it's snowing. The cat has come outside with me to discover it's freezing, so I try to rush us back in from the mailbox. Ronald, however, takes off running, and I chase after him in my slippers.

From the street I call to him, but he keeps going. He seems to know where he is headed, but I do not. I am lurking through backyards, frozen grass cracking beneath my feet.

Mary Jacobs' back door slides open and a tall boy—almost man—with blonde hair and bloodshot eyes stares at me. "Hey" he says, "this your cat?" Ronald is at his feet.

"Bad cat," I say scooping him up into my arms. "Thanks," I say to the boy.

"You look cold."

I realize that I am shivering.

"You can come in and warm up if you want."

I hesitate, debating between awkwardness and weather, but I'm so cold that I agree. We walk into the dark house and he offers me a seat on the couch downstairs. There are clothes all over the floor, empty coke cans scattered throughout the room, a couple of pizza boxes, and a big TV with a game system.

"You must be Mary's son," I say, wishing now that I would have just run home.

"Yeah."

"Is she home?"

"No she's out. Who are you? Friends with her?"

I'm relieved. I don't want to know what Mary would think if she saw that I was running around in my PJ's and hadn't brushed my hair today, though I can't imagine that she would descend into this disaster of a room.

"We play bridge together. I'm Catherine Hastings."

"Mark."

"Nice to meet you."

"You know, I think I heard of you. The one that got fired, right?"

"Laid off," I say, though it doesn't matter much. "And you're her son in college?"

"Sophomore."

"How do you like it?"

He starts to tell me about his classes, his friends, his girlfriend. I add anecdotes from my years in college, picking out the ones that I think that he'll like best, like getting chased by the cops or punching a guy in the face at the club. He laughs like I know his mother would not.

The conversation gets a little serious when I ask him what he wants to be. It turns out that he has no idea, that he somehow has none of the direction that his mother has been working to give him for the past 19 years. He looks genuinely concerned about his future.

"What should I do?" he asks me.

His face is stern, so I feel a little bad about laughing. "You're asking me? You and I are on the same boat, my friend. But you have much more time to decide."

"You're not that old," he says.

"Thanks," I say sarcastically, and he smiles. He has Mary's smile, but it looks better on him, the way his small pink lips curl up at the corners.

"You have kids?" he asks.

"No."

"How come?"

I arch my eyebrow at him, trying to determine if he can be trusted. “I don’t want to have them. Is that horrible?”

He doesn’t know what to say to that, and I can’t say that I blame him. I’m wondering why I ever even opened my mouth. I look around for where Ronald has got to, thinking that it's time to go. Now that I can feel my legs again, I want to get out of here.

"Wanna smoke some weed?" he says before I actually make a move.

I'm stunned and silent at first, and he looks nervous, but then I start to laugh.

"Oh God. I mean, well, okay."

I can’t seem to stop laughing. Mark is making faces at the cat. He’s twitching his nose and every so often he yells, “You plump little fluff!” The world seems to have shifted slightly off angle, and my lungs hurt, but I take deep breaths to inhale the pain.

“What the hell kind of a name is Ronald for a cat?”

I’m laughing, doubled over on the couch, but I can’t quite recall what is so funny. I feel as if I am wasting away.

“Mrs. H!” Mark is calling, but he sounds like he is too far from me. I imagine that I can feel everything, the blood running through my veins, the jolt from every tick of the clock on the wall, the rotation of the earth in endless circles. None of it matters at all.

Mark is floating in space before me. He moves his arms as he swims around the coffee table toward his glass of water. He glances at me and starts to giggle again. I imagine the dazed look that must be on my face.

Ronald bolts across the room, and we shout at him gleefully. “Ronald! Ronald! What’s wrong with you, you little fool?”

I'm still a little baked when Andrew gets home from work. I've brushed my teeth five times or so in hopes that my husband will be close enough to me to smell my breath. I'm still and silent as he moves around the house removing his tie and his shoes. As he sidles into the room I have an image of him dressed up as Tom Cruise for one Halloween in the 80s, when he slid around in his socks all night wearing Ray Bans. I think he still has the same white dress shirt that he used, but now he always wears it with pants.

"Cath," he says seriously. "Are you okay?"

I stare at him, intending to nod. He comes closer and he kisses me on the forehead. "And how is the job hunt going?"

"Wonderfully."

He looks doubtful so I smile bigger. "You know Minnie Lewis just got a new job at Wright. It can be done."

I think he is trying to be encouraging.

"Will you work on sending out the Christmas cards, though, since you have a little extra time?"

"Of course," I say, imagining the loopy letters that will provide messages of holiday joy for all of our acquaintances. "Have to get out those cards, right?"

Andrew wraps his arms around me for a moment, pleased with my acquiescence. I hold onto him as tightly as I can. I press my head against his shoulder, press my lips to his cheek. I remember when we first starting dating and he listed his ten favorite things about my body in

order. *My lips, my eyes...* I want to beg him to tell me again. “And maybe you should get a new dress for the Lake’s party this year,” he says as he lets me go.

Mark is on the couch like a patient in a shrink’s office with a joint between his thumb and index finger. I’m almost positive that it is a Wednesday, but Mark insists that it’s a Tuesday. Either way, he will be leaving to go back to college soon. He might be excited if it weren’t for his horrible classes.

He’s just discovered *The Ramones*, and “My Brain is Hanging Upside Down” is bumping from a speaker in the corner.

“You should watch the movie *Rock and Roll High School*,” I tell him.

“I don’t know what that is.”

My sigh is a symphony of disappointed instruments.

It’s strange to me that he doesn’t know about things that I love, that he’s never seen *Saturday Night Fever* or read *Flowers in the Attic*. I want to feed him my memories, to give him spoonfuls of Johnny Cash lyrics and my mother’s voice, of the taste of my first kiss.

“I think I might just change my major,” he says. “I won’t even tell my mother. I’ll just change it to something ridiculous like philosophy or poetry.”

“I think those are both admirable things.”

“Okay then. You can tell my mother.”

“Shall we have a talk about poetry today?” I ask. “Or perhaps have a great philosophical discussion?”

“One fish, two fish. Red fish, blue fish.”

I am laughing. Thank God this kid has read something. He continues quoting. I clap when he is done, and we sit in silence for a moment.

It's my turn then, I suppose.

"In me she has drowned a young girl, and in me an old woman rises toward her day after day, like a terrible fish."

Mark is nonchalant. "That doesn't even have any made up words. What is it?"

"Sylvia Plath."

"Who?"

"Why do I bother?"

"No, no. Say it again." I do, and he is contemplative. "That's dark. And super weird. But what's it about?"

"Getting old, I suppose, and becoming a different person than you thought. Nothing you would understand yet."

"Well I can't help it, grandma."

We laugh together, and I remember how long it has been since my laugh has been real.

"My mom has been driving me crazy," Mark says, interrupting my thoughts.

I wonder if I should tell him that I think she might *be* crazy, that her perfect curls and her vacuumed cushions terrify me. "I'm sure she means well."

He laughs sadistically. "You don't even know her. You only know how bad she is at cards."

Andrew is in his favorite chair in the living room. The television is humming, but he isn't looking in that direction. His eyes are fixed on the wall, glazed over, but I imagine that he is

staring dreamily at the wedding picture that dangles from a rusty nail. Without a word I walk into the room and straddle him, press my lips into his, cling to him. This time I will make him feel it. Outside the rain pours down, and we are flooded. We are surrounded by a whirlpool of debris, our heads just barely above water, but still I cling to him, never bothering to move my arms or flail about. Never trying to swim.

He lets go of me and comes up for air. "You sad, strange little thing," he says softly. I sink deeper and deeper until I realize that I am drowning.

"What shall we have for dinner, dear?" he asks.

Mark has been packing. He is leaving for school tomorrow. I'm foolishly sad about it, though I'd never let him know that. Andrew has been on my case about where I am always wandering off to in my sweats that never get sweaty. Luckily, Mark keeps a stock of Febreze in his closet.

Mark tells me of his plans between puffs of smoke. He tells me that while he still doesn't know just what he wants to do, he wants it to be something beautiful. He goes on and on until his words all blur together, and I forget where I am.

"There's something wrong with you, isn't there?" he says suddenly.

I am silent. It's so wonderful not to think.

"Mrs. H?"

I smile at him.

"So mom's hosting bridge tonight," he says after a while. "Are you going?"



I wish that he was my kid, and that Mary wasn't such a grump. Does she know that she has such a great kid? I want to ask him, and to tell him that he's wonderful and that he can do anything if only he actually does *something*.

"I'm going," I say. "What else have I got to do?"

I see pity in his eyes.

"I think you're my best friend," he says softly.

"You sap," I say as I exhale.

"We could do something tonight," he says. "On my last night in town. We *should* do something."

"Like what?"

Mark's eyes are bloodshot, and there is chocolate icing all over his hands. We had spent about an hour trying to figure out something spectacular to do. Mark suggested donating his mother's pound of make-up to women in need, I wanted to fill up balloons with confetti and shoot them down, sprinkling a celebration all over the neighborhood, but we've settled for this: chocolate fudge brownies with chocolate icing. We have made a mess out of my kitchen while Andrew is gone. Mark has a knack for baking though; I think Mary would be proud if she knew. He licks his fingers in satisfaction. "They're delicious," he says.

We've made them for the bridge club, for Mark's darling mother and her friends and acquaintances, myself included.

"Should we add silver sprinkles?" Mark asks.

"Don't over-do it. These brownies are classy."

We wrap them up in plastic and giggle at each other like mischievous children.

Andrea Lake seems to have forgotten about gravity. She teeters out of her chair and smacks onto the kitchen floor, her cards spilling across the tiles. She bursts out laughing, and then the rest of the women laugh as well, chocolate smudged around their lips and on their teeth. Alice Peters says that she hasn't felt this light in a million years. She starts to tell a story about when she was a little girl, but breaks into giggles. Next to me, Jenny Sparks grabs my hand. "You're beautiful, Catherine," she grins. Andrew would be so pleased to see them admiring me, especially because I'm not sure that it's ever happened before.

Mark comes into the kitchen for a glass of water, and we make gleeful eye contact. The ladies fawn over him as well. I feel powerful and magnificent.

"Why didn't you go to that interview my husband set up?" Alice asks me, trying to gain some control, though I don't think she minds how she is feeling. I think she knows what is happening, something from her distant past, and she is embracing it. All of them, they know, they look at me with surprised faces as they realize it, but do not complain.

"I want to start over. I want to be something different."

They nod but don't seem to have heard the words.

Unfortunately Mark's mother has given up sweets, and when she comes back in from the living room she is shocked to find the state of her friends and her kitchen.

"Andrea, why are you on the floor?" she asks.

Andrea looks up at her dreamily. "You're floor is wonderful. It's so clean, it smells like lemon!"

Mary is baffled. "What's happening?" She looks to the rest of us for an answer. Everyone laughs.

I sneak to the basement to giggle with Mark just as Andrea starts to have another brownie. I know he has been listening to all of this, that he has been enjoying seeing these uptight women that he has know his whole life without their normal composure. I collapse onto the couch, grinning.

“Perfect,” Mark says.

But his mother is not far behind me. She marches down the steps to interrupt our laughter, her face scrunched up in anger.

“What the hell is the meaning of this?” she yells.

Mark and I are frozen as Mary continues screaming.

“I’ve always known that there was something wrong with you, Catherine. I was nice to you in spite of it all. But now you’ve gone too far. I want you out of my house before I call the cops, and I want you to know that I plan to call Andrew the second I’m back up those stairs. Does he know that you haven’t been going to any interviews? He will now, I assure you. You are no longer welcome here.”

“Lighten up, Mary,” I say, but she points to the sliding door.

“I’ll deal with you later,” she says to Mark before marching up the stairs.

"So you mean this whole time you've been out at all hours of the night smoking pot with the neighbor kid?" Andrew is pacing the living room.

I can't believe Mary told on me. "He's my friend," I say, though it seems a weak defense.

"Are you a teenager, Catherine? You're unbelievable and so irresponsible. What is wrong with you?"

I let my knees buckle, and I sink to the floor. In my mind I beg him not to simply step over me, not to go to a different room in the house, not to live a separate life from mine. I remember that Mark is leaving, that I am all alone.

"Catherine, what happened to you?" Andrew asks. His face softens, and he's pleading with me. He bends down and searches my face. I feel as though I could ask him the same question, but perhaps he's always been this way. Perhaps it is me after all.

"Remember when we bought this house?" I ask. "We filled the Jacuzzi and stocked up on champagne and sat in that tub until we were wrinkled all over and could barely see straight."

"Catherine," he says.

"Yes?"

He puts his arm around me and we lie on the floor in silence. I stare straight up as if looking at the stars, but there are only plain white squares on the ceiling.

"Am I different now?" I ask. I feel old and worn out.

"I think maybe since you lost your job. Maybe you've just been a bit antsy, a little stir-crazy." He looks at me hopefully. "You were happy, right? Before all of that?"

It's hard to remember ever feeling anything before. It's hard to remember what I wanted.

"You know, I just can't quite recall," I say.

## Chapter 5: The Garden

Peter sits on a boulder, one of those fake rocks that couldn't possibly have formed naturally in the place where it lies. It is one of the better days, finally sunny after what seemed like weeks of rain, the flowers in the garden fresh from drinking in the extra water, benefiting from the turmoil of the storms. Peter is quiet, notebook in hand, making up a story to act out with his one and only friend from school. He tugs his shirt sleeves back up his arms; his clothes are always too big, sagging off of his body, frumpy and defiant. He suddenly presses his pen to the page and scribbles frantically, short, black stick letters filling the white empty space. The mermaid is seducing the pirate, convincing him to thrust himself into the sea to stay with her. Peter's sleeve falls again, and he quickly yanks it out of the way.

He can still feel the dull pain in his face, his eyelids pinched together by the swollen lump surrounding his eye. Though its been a while since he even bothered to inspect himself in the mirror, Peter imagines the soft purple and blue color, the spots where it fades into a brownish yellow like an impressionist work of art on the left side of his face. The girl from across the street walks by every so often, with her dog tugging at his leash, and Peter peeks at her from behind the rhododendrons. He always notices her, of course he does; he thinks if he were a normal boy then the folds of her pink dress, the way they dance and curl around her legs as she moves back and forth, would probably stir something deep inside of him. But to Peter she is not a teenage girl, not a crush or a love interest. To Peter she is simply a character.

It is her description that he writes for the mermaid, how she moves through the water like a dance, lifting her hand to tuck her hair behind her ears as she emerges, flipping her fins to get attention. He's lucky to have the girl from across the street for such an inspiration, and even

though Peter expects she only wants to tease him—he's too short to be of much interest to anyone of the opposite sex—he's perfectly happy to put her in his play.

He presses his fingers to the bag of skin under his eye just to feel how much it still hurts. He thinks of going to get more ice, something cool to help ease his face back into its normal shape, but he doesn't feel like moving.

The girl is walking past his house. Maybe she would even consent to acting as the mermaid in the play; all girls want to be actresses, to be worshipped by crowds of people. Peter imagines her on a stage, flowers from the garden in her hair, swimming gracefully stage left to stage right, her lips curved in a mischievous smile. Peter grins just picturing it.

"Hello there," his father says.

"Hi."

"It's nice to see you smile."

Peter closes his book, holds it tightly on his lap.

"How's the eye?"

Peter squints up into the sun.

"It's fine."

"Are you going to tell me more about what happened?"

Father always wants to talk. He wants to talk about Alex and their family. He wants to talk about Peter's plays and his black eye. Despite the lack of response he gets from Peter or from Mother, Father keeps asking questions.

"What shall we do? Shall we send you to Calicut?"

This is not the first time the boarding school has been brought up. It is an opportunity for Peter to go away and start again, to be challenged in his classes, to be praised for his creativity.

It's the kind of place where they don't tolerate fists hammering into delicate faces. It's the obvious solution.

"If I went to Calleat, it wouldn't be because of this. It would be because she thinks I'm crazy."

"That's certainly not true."

"Maybe I am crazy. I don't blame her."

"You've had a difficult childhood." Father hangs his head. "You've seen and experienced things no child should. You have had to deal with it. Everyone grieves in his or her own way, and you were just a boy when you had to figure out how. You're still a boy."

"You make it sound like pretending to be a dead person is a normal response." It's the first time Peter has said anything about it aloud.

Father shakes his head. "I'm saying it's not crazy. She doesn't think that it's crazy. I'm saying you're only fourteen and we worry about you getting in fights." Peter's father paces a short route between the roses and the tulips. They are silent for a moment as he pauses, inspecting the flowers.

"God, the lilies look so nice this year. They really turned out. Your mother's favorite."

"Do you think it will help her if I go? Do you think it's for the best?"

"It's your decision, Peter. I think you should worry about what you want. Really, it's because of the fighting that I think—"

"I don't care about the fighting."

"Then stay. I guess you'd miss her."

For a moment, Peter thinks that he is talking about Mother, but then he nods at the mermaid who is taking her dog up the driveway across the street.

“No.”

They look each other, but Peter quickly averts his eyes back to the girl.

“You’re young to be making such a big decision. If you didn’t like it you could come back. We could always work it out.”

“Yes, I want to go,” Peter says. “I’ll be happy to leave. They have that theater program. I’m sick of getting punched in the face really.” For a moment he wants to embrace his father, to tell him how much he appreciates everything, and he knows how much he has tried.

“Keep thinking about it.” Peter nods, and they are silent.

“Well, I guess I’ll leave you alone,” Father says. He puts his hand on Peter’s shoulder, just for a moment, and then walks back toward the house.

Peter doesn’t feel like continuing to write. He sits alone, staring at the pages of his notebook trying to read the words that he has already written, but they all seem to blur together. He looks up to watch the girl instead. She’s unleashing the dog, guiding it into her house. Peter stands and thinks that it might be the last time he will see her, that he needs to remember her face, her hair, that he needs to get it all down on paper, to use it, to keep those details.

She turns and sees him standing there as she’s about to shut her door. Peter doesn’t move; he holds his breath. Perhaps he could say goodbye.

“What are you looking at?” she calls.

Peter doesn’t answer. The girl disappears behind the door and slams it shut.

Peter wants to leave this house, this town; he wasn’t lying to his father. He will be happy to go. He grabs his things from the rock, starts to walk back toward the house. The birds are chirping loudly, singing to him.



He's almost to the door when he stops; he turns back, walks past the roses and the tulips to the lilies. He bends down, inspecting them, their soft white petals swaying back and forth in the wind, so pure and alive, his mother's favorite. He plucks them from their roots, only the best ones. He gathers them in his hand, brings them to his nose to take in the sweet scent, thinks of petals on his mother's old dress. He takes them with him, leaving his book and pens in the grass, and without looking back across the street he goes into the only home he knows.

## Chapter 6: Iris

Upon the birth of her seventh child, Iris determined that it was necessary that she should be fixed. She had not wanted seven children after all, and although she had done everything in her power to keep from getting pregnant, somehow, she had not been able to stop it from happening. Of course, Iris loved her children, each of them individually. She recognized that they all had their own unique personalities, though she often only saw them as an exhausting collective. She knew, however, that number seven had to be the last one.

After the birth, Iris felt as though her insides had been ripped from her alongside the baby, and she had a clouded image in her mind of the blood from her body splattered on the white linoleum hospital floor. She sat in the stiff bed, exhausted and delirious, looking around for the lost contents of her insides, looking for what she had lost.

“God this is the cutest baby I have ever seen,” Iris’ mother-in-law said as she plucked the new infant from its mother’s breast. Iris wanted to ask her what she thought about all of the rest of them. Had they been the cutest babies at one point as well? She looked up from the floor and at the scrunched, tiny face of her son.

“Looks so much like Charlie when he was a baby,” Miranda cooed. Iris smiled, dazed. She wondered if she should be offended that the cutest baby her mother-in-law had ever seen didn’t look much like his mother. But Iris said nothing.

She also said nothing about how much she wanted to remain in the hospital, lying in the bed by herself and sometimes holding only one sleeping child, never having to wake up in the middle of the night to screaming that sounded like harpies guarding the underworld. She was glad that all of the children came to visit, squeezing her and holding her hand, asking her if she was all right, and she was glad when they went home, their snotty faces wrapped in winter

scarves, knitted hats upon their heads. She was glad when she was all alone, fast asleep until her husband kissed her, until he woke her from all of her fairytale dreams and told her that it was time to go home.

Iris jumped a little, surprised at Charlie's lips on hers after having been in such a deep and wonderful sleep. She was so bewildered that he seemed to be part of her dream, some kind vision hanging before her until she realized that he was real. She continued to feel groggy from her room to the parking lot all the way to their living room where the bunch of little ones waited to greet her along with their grandparents.

"Show us the new baby, Mama!" they yelled, and Iris placed the car seat with a tiny baby on the floor in front of them as if he was a science project. "What's his name?" they asked, impatient to meet their new brother.

Iris, still in a fog, couldn't seem to remember the answer, and she stared at the baby without making a sound.

"This is baby Theodore," Charlie said as if announcing a prince. "Do you want to come and say hello to him?"

The children gathered around him ready to stare at his little sleeping face. Iris inspected all of them. It seemed unreal, seven beautiful little people that she had given birth to, that she was responsible for.

Abby went up to take her hand. "Mama," she said. "Will you read me a story?"

"Your mother needs to get some rest," Iris' father said, and she looked up, surprised to find all four grandparents staring at her.

"No," Iris said. "I want to read to her," and though she moved slowly and carefully, she felt she floated up the stairs and into the room that Abby shared with her little sisters. She sat in a

chair and waited for the book that her daughter would choose to be placed in her lap, and then she read aloud the words on the page, to her little girl, and to her other daughters and sons that had accompanied them, without even understanding the words. At the end of the reading, Iris heard the baby crying. There was something so much more overwhelming and terrifying about there being seven children than there had been when there was only six.

In the shower, Iris went through each of their names and ages in her head. Tommy, the oldest, was eleven. He had come shortly after she married Charlie. Then Rebecca who was nine. Alexander, age eight. Abby was six, Natalie, four. Lindsey was only two. And then, rounding out the bunch was the new little baby Theodore, one day old. Iris recited them over and over again, as if it was possible that she would forget somehow, now that there was another to remember. She washed her hair three times and didn't realize it until she rinsed the final coat of shampoo from her head. She determined that as soon as it was possible she would get her tubes tied up tight so that no baby would grow inside of her again.

"Iris," Charlie said as he walked into the bathroom. "Everything okay? You've been in here a while."

Iris looked down to see the breast milk leaking from her chest, falling down to be washed away by the water.

"I think Teddy is starving," Charlie said. "He needs his mother."

Iris ran her hands over her body, over the stretch marks and the fat that now lived on her bones like a foreign and uncomfortable parasite. She covered herself and went to find her family.

She loved them so much, those little people. She loved the tiny fingers and the way they talked and the way they depended on her. She was so blessed, and everyone said it, how lucky she was to have such a big, healthy family. Iris would scream at herself in her head about how

happy she was, about how great her life was, but as the baby latched onto her and she sat up through the night with baggy sockets and bloodshot eyes, she imagined living in a house that was clean and organized, maybe even an apartment in the middle of Istanbul full of exotic plants and lovely tile decorating. She looked at herself in the large mirror in the hallway.

“Mommy! Mommy!” Lindsey called through the middle of the night.

“I’m coming,” Iris said softly. “I’m coming.”

Iris hadn’t been surprised when she learned that she was pregnant with her seventh child. She had kept thinking it was just a matter of time, even if she set an alarm to warn her that it was time to take her birth control, even if she stopped her husband in their stolen, quiet, and careful moments of passion to make sure they were protected, six children had taught Iris that there was something almost magical about their sexual encounters, something that couldn’t be stopped so easily.

When it happened, Iris could feel her body change. It was like a sixth sense by now; she’d been giving birth since she was just 22. She knew to expect the hormonal shift, the morning sickness. She was eating pickles like potato chips and crying at commercials for dog food. Iris was aware of her body; she was quite familiar with the very particular and peculiar way that it would feel, and so she knew when she bought and took the little plastic test that it would be positive.

What Iris didn’t know was what to expect of Charlie. For him, every announcement had brought elation, every pregnancy was another wonderful miracle, unexpected—sure—but welcomed. He would call their friends and family and tell them the news. And he would get out the clothes they had just packed away, buy new pacifiers to replace those they had just thrown

out. Though Charlie had been an only child, having a big family suited him. He was thrilled, and it rubbed off on Iris. It made her feel like she could do it all over again and never look back.

But surely, it would be different with another pregnancy, Iris thought. After he hadn't gotten that promotion and they were sneaking funds from the slim college account to continue to make ends meet. After they had become so content with their family of eight, that they had just gotten used to their daily routine. He'd been stressed lately, she could see it in the lines of his face and hear it in the soft tone of his voice. And she thought he might consider the effect that pregnancy was having on her body, that he might express some doubt. When he arrived home that day, the day she took the test, Iris kept wiping down the counters and pacing through the kitchen, picking up Lindsey and putting her down. She finally blurted it out quickly: "I'm pregnant!" to see what he would say.

His eyes started to well up with tears. "What?" He wrapped his arms around her, and she wondered if he was trying to comfort her, if he understood the difficulty of this announcement.

"That's wonderful," he said into her hair. "I can't believe it. I'm so happy. I need this, Iris. It's the best news I've heard in a long time."

He didn't stop smiling for days afterward, and for those nine months his excitement was enough to keep her going, no looking back.

"You want to do what?" Charlie asked her again, still not comprehending. He was whispering so as not to wake their new baby, who was sleeping soundly in the next room.

"Tubal ligation," Iris said slowly. She had looked up the proper terminology that morning in the hopes that she could convince her husband to take her seriously. It was still an hour before Natalie needed to be picked up from preschool, and Lindsey was sleeping upstairs.

“I know what it is. I’m just not sure why you want to go through with it.”

“It’s pretty simple these days. Outpatient procedure, quick recovery. I would never ask you to get a vasectomy, Charlie, but this is something we need to take care of. It seems that we are ridiculously and powerfully fertile.”

Iris watched her husband pace across the room in front of her. She should be sleeping, using these few precious hours of simultaneous school and naptime to get some rest. But she knew that they would never talk about this otherwise. Charlie had taken the day off of work to help her, and this was her shot to make him listen.

“The doctor said something about it when we were in the hospital, but I didn’t think—we’ll just use protection. Then we won’t have to worry about you having surgery and paying for it.”

“I think our insurance will help a lot, and god, Charlie, haven’t we been using protection when we made almost every one of our children?”

“We weren’t careful enough. We’ll be better about it.”

“I cannot have another, baby. That’s just it; I can’t possibly do it. I want to be sure that there is no possible way that it will happen. Can’t you understand that? We have *seven* children now.”

“And you don’t love them all?” he asked.

Iris knew that he didn’t mean it, that he was caught up in the moment and frustrated and wouldn’t have normally asked such a question. Still, she couldn’t help but be hurt. She tried to hide the tears that started to well up in her eyes.

“I’m sorry. Of course I know that you do. You are a wonderful mother.” He kissed her forehead. “Let’s talk about this later. I’m going to check on Teddy, and you should sleep.” He brought her a blanket before he left the room.

Iris sank into the couch. Seven was too many people to be responsible for.

Instead of counting sheep to fall asleep, Iris counted children. She thought about those TV shows where the parents had twenty kids or fifteen or twelve. She didn’t know how they did it all. Six had been almost manageable, especially as they were starting to get older, to go to school, to take care of themselves, but then to have a new baby and start the whole process over again? Tommy, Rebecca, Alex, Abby, Natalie, Lindsey, and the baby. All their faces mashed together in her mind, an amalgamation of each of their features in which she could see herself prominently. She was exhausted, but the stress of worrying about them, about remembering to make sure that each kid got its due amount of parenting, was keeping her awake.

Of course, one would imagine that fitting seven children into what was really a three-bedroom house would be unbelievably frustrating. Installing three, then finagling four babies into the house was horrible enough for Iris, trying to make room for all of the tiny pink and blue onesies, for the stuffed giraffes, for the Little People Farm and Firehouse and Nativity, for “If You Give a Moose a Muffin” and “Where the Wild Things Are.” The contents of what should have been in a closet spilled out in the room, what should have stayed in the room spilled out into the hallway, then the bathroom, until walking into Iris and Charlie’s master bedroom would have aroused suspicions that two responsible adults were somehow finding a way to live in the middle of Pee Wee’s Playhouse.

Iris wouldn’t invite anyone over; she wouldn’t dare let her mother-in-law walk through the door when she came to pick up the kids. She wandered through the house lined with clothes



and toys and spit rags and crayons as if she was moving through a trash heap, disgusted with her family's lack of organization. Before the fifth came, really just right after the fourth was born, Iris decided to do something about it, to use her skills as an architect major to fix the inside of her house. She went online, she grabbed catalogs, she made their ideas better, she bought loft beds and tweaked shelving units, she somehow managed to fit all the pieces of the puzzle together with dressers and drawers and hampers and plastic tubs. In the spare minutes of her days when the kids were occupied or sleeping, she took everything she had learned about design and creativity in her college classes, and used it to organize her life into every available nook of her home.

Every time she found out she was pregnant again, it gave her a new challenge: how could she manage to fit one more? She would take her work apart, and build it all back up again, somehow create, as if out of thin air, the room in the house for another human being. But then came the news of number seven, and she couldn't possibly figure out where to put him. She had moved the girls to the largest bedroom with two sets of bunk beds, and the boys were in a smaller room with one bunk bed that couldn't possibly even fit another single. Theodore would be in the crib in her room, but would she have to share a bedroom with her youngest son until Tommy was in college?

Charlie carried in the crying baby. "I changed him," he said. "But he needs you."

"I'm so tired," Iris said, and she wanted to cry again.

"I know, but if you just feed Teddy, then I'll take care of them, and you can sleep."

"But Natalie needs to be picked up from school."

"I'll do it. I'll take them with me."

"I don't want Teddy out of the house yet."

“He’ll be fine.”

“School’s are so germy. You can’t take him there.”

“Make up your mind, Iris. What do you want?”

The baby screamed louder and louder.

Iris made the appointment at the doctor’s office without telling Charlie. She had to wait six weeks for it to actually happen. She didn’t know what she would tell him when the time came, when she needed someone to pick her up from the hospital, when she couldn’t shower for a bit after, why she was in pain. She would, of course, have to tell him the truth at some point, but she didn’t know how or when she would do it.

Iris also couldn’t decide whether Teddy was the most restless and unhappy baby that she had ever seen or if she was just getting too old to take care of an infant. She hardly slept. Tommy needed help with his homework and Rebecca didn’t feel well and Alex was hungry, and Lindsey was flinging balls of Play-doh around the kitchen. Iris had a patch of orange stuck to her shoe. And then Charlie called to say that he would be home late again if she wouldn’t mind sticking his dinner in the fridge.

Iris wrapped up the Parmesan chicken and green beans. “Mama, are you crying?” Natalie asked her.

Iris picked up her daughter and held her to her chest. “Everything’s okay,” she said. “Mama’s okay.” She sent Natalie to help clean up the Play-doh and went to pick up her youngest and unhappiest child.

She was glad that Charlie’s mother, who didn’t live far away, sometimes came to help out with the children. Iris appreciated having an extra set of hands, though often the stress of

coexisting with her mother-in-law made her want to smash things on the kitchen floor. She had fantasies of throwing a gravy boat—which was barely used anyway—and letting it break into pieces as it hit the wall right next to Miranda’s head. And though it was certainly nice to have someone else to coo at the new baby, who was colicky and starting to make Iris feel as though she was an extremely unfit parent, when Miranda would look at her with sharp eyes, seeming to examine every inch of her, Iris wanted to scream at the top of her lungs even louder than Theodore.

Iris thought about bringing up the surgery with her mother-in-law, to have someone else to confide in about her plans who might understand. After all, it really wasn’t a big deal to anyone but Charlie who was worried about the procedure and the money and, Iris thought, maybe even a little concerned about the fact that she would be sterile. It seemed that Charlie wanted a million children, and really, since Tommy had been an accident and their family had been in such a rush to begin, it was something that they had never really talked about before. They hadn’t had that typical discussion about how many children they wanted, and it had led to what seemed like continuous pregnancy and childbirth, Charlie as happy as ever every time.

And even though Charlie didn’t understand it, Iris was sure that his mother would. Miranda certainly understood that seven children was a lot; she said so all of the time. But Miranda had only had one child, after years of trying and going to doctors and hoping for many of them. It was something that Iris had known about her since the first time they met, something that seemed to define her in the way that having seven had defined Iris.

“You and Charlie are just so lucky,” his mother said as she changed the baby’s diaper.

Iris nodded. “I never thought I would have so many healthy, wonderful children.”

“And you still look pretty darn good after all of it too.”

Iris wrapped her arms around her stomach and knew it was a lie.

She convinced her parents to come back for her surgery, though they were skeptical about Charlie not knowing any details. Her mother would stay with the little kids and wait for the others to get home from school. Her father would drive her and stay through the operation to take her home after in case she was woozy from painkillers. The doctor had asked time and again if she was really sure about the operation, saying any reversal would be risky and nearly impossible, and Iris assured him every time that she knew that this was what she wanted. Of course, she felt guilty that she hadn't yet told her husband, but it would be fine. Iris knew that once it was over with Charlie would have to accept it. She could imagine the sadness that he would hold in, the way he would look at her as if she had betrayed him, but he would have to move forward.

As Iris counted backwards on the operating table, she saw her children's faces in her mind. Alex had caught a cold, sniffing all over the place, and she was afraid it would spread to the rest of them; they were always sharing germs, and Rebecca couldn't get sick because she had a dance recital that weekend and... and... Iris drifted off under the anesthesia worrying about the minor illness taking over her family.

She dreamt of a forest wrapped in the overwhelming trees, beady eyes of little animals watching her from the distance, squirrels darting back and forth across her path. In the dream she was younger, she could tell by the ways her hands felt, soft with thin fingers, and the way her hair was still long and thick. She used a lake in the forest as a looking glass to try to see herself, but the water was too murky, and she couldn't make out her reflection. In a clearing in the woods she came upon a house. She knew it was her house, though it looked nothing like the place where

she lived in real life. She just knew it was where she needed to go, and inside she found her children, sitting around a large table. She knew they were her children though they looked nothing like the seven little people that she had given birth to. They seemed misshapen and ugly creatures, but they belonged to her.

She watched them from the doorway, sitting around the table laughing and talking to each other. When they saw her standing there they fell silent for a moment before taking up a loud chant, she didn't know the words that they were saying, but they were calling to her. She walked into the room, and the ugly little beings that were her children laid her down upon the table with mangled smiles, and they touched her face.

"I love you," she said to them all, and they kept chanting and smiling, looking at her intensely as she lay before them.

Then, calmly, they took a large knife from the table and they cut through her skin. They sliced away at her until they took out her liver and lungs, but even though they had dissected her, she was still alive and breathing. She continued watching as they held up her organs. They passed them around the table, each taking a bite, and she saw her skin turning sallow, her hands wrinkling before her eyes.

They kept chanting with open mouths, their faces smeared with her blood, and she watched and watched, lying on the table before them and never making any complaint.

When Iris woke up her father was by her side.

"Hey kid," he said with a smile.

"It's over?"

"Yep, no problems at all. We can go soon."

“Have you talked to mom? Is she doing all right with them? Has Teddy eaten?”

“Everything is fine, Iris. Your mom’s got it under control.”

“I want to go home and see them.”

Iris was sensitive in the spot where they had operated, but she still squeezed her children against her when she arrived at the house.

“Grandma’s taking us to dinner,” they said gleefully, “when Dad gets home.”

Iris lay on the couch, her seven children surrounding her. They watched TV and snuggled against her, happy to have their mother at home.

“So do you feel any different?” Iris’ mother asked when the children were absorbed with the television.

Iris sat silent, thinking of the answer. “I feel relieved, I suppose,” she answered finally. “Knowing that this is the last,” she looked at the baby in her arms.

“But really,” Iris said after a while, not even sure her mother was listening, “I guess it doesn’t matter anymore. There are already so many of them. I guess this is it.”

When Charlie came through the front door, he looked surprised to find his family all together in the living room. He stood in the doorway looking at all of them; they were laughing and talking with each other. Iris watched him.

“Look at my big happy family,” he said grinning. He walked in to kiss Iris on the forehead as yet unaware of the pain in her body, he said hello to the children, who greeted him with smiling faces, and then he went upstairs to change his clothes for dinner.

Iris’ parents helped her get the children ready to leave, putting on their coats and shoes, wrapping each of them up in their scarves and mittens, taking the little ones to the bathroom.

As they were about to head out the door for dinner, the party of 11, Iris stood in the hall in a daze thinking about that night in bed when she would come clean to Charlie. She would find some crevice in her house to hide her dishonesty; she would tuck it away on a shelf in the back of the closet and never look for it again. But still things would spill out, the Cheerios, the diapers, the cords of the video game controllers just waiting to twist themselves around her and bring her down, knees against hardwood, hands smacking the yellow-stained rug. It was like Natalie's Plah-doh mold; she would carefully squeeze something into place for another part to get pushed out.

"Mama, let's go now!" the children shouted, and Iris wiped the snot from their noses and followed them out the door knowing that there would only ever be seven of them, knowing that they needed her desperately, knowing that all she had to do was be their mother, and they would love her for it.

## Chapter 7: Nursery

“I could really go for a cigarette,” Elizabeth says, indignantly exhaling fresh clean air from her lungs. It’s one of the days where she actually speaks, where she can pretend that there is more to her life than sitting alone in a rocking chair waiting to die in the nursery where her sons once slept.

Ramona laughs. “I have to admire your persistence, but I’m afraid I can never give in.” She takes Elizabeth’s blood pressure, then doles out the medicine. “You look good today though.”

“Because you take such good care of me.” Elizabeth smiles as she says it, though she can hear the thin, unconvincing rasp in her voice.

“Do you want to watch something tonight? I can turn on a show for you.”

“Just the book is fine, Ramona,” Elizabeth says, nodding to the copy of *Great Expectations* on the table.

“You’re almost done,” Ramona says as she places it in Elizabeth’s wrinkled fingers. “I’ll have to bring you something else.”

Before the nurse can make it out of the door and into the hallway, Elizabeth closes her eyes and asks the question again, the one she always asks: “Have you heard anything from him?”

“Not yet,” Ramona says, her ever sad but determined answer.

Back and forth, for the most part and for the rest of her life, Elizabeth will remain on the shifting but solitary island of her rocking chair, her eyes gulping down the pages of old books. Ramona is the one person that she has to speak to, though she often chooses to remain silent. She waits, reading the classics, passing the time, staring out the large nursery window, sometimes



wishing her chair would eject her violently until she would fly out into the sunshine and through the sweet air of summer.

“How about that cigarette?” Elizabeth asks when Ramona comes back to the nursery.

“You know what I’m going to say.”

“There’s no one else here. No one will know.”

They were all gone, the people who would have minded the smoke, who would have worried about her health. Alex had been the first to go, though Elizabeth still saw his little purple face, his skinny little fingers when she closed her eyes. After he died, she had written a list of all the things she could remember about him, his favorite color, the song he sang in the bath, the look on his face when he slept. She had gone over it again and again trying to will him back to life.

Maybe what she should have done was focus all of her energy and love on the people she had left. She had tried to, if only briefly, to hold onto Peter because he was the center of everything, to take him out to the circus, to the park, to the zoo. But he wore his brother’s clothes; he spoke like him with rough R’s and long S’s, laughed like him in sharp bursts. Elizabeth couldn’t take it.

When Peter had left for school, still a boy, but more somber than the son she remembered, Elizabeth had expected the change would be good for both of them. She would still write to him often, she would call him, twisting the phone cord so tightly around her hand as she spoke that it would almost cut off her circulation, she would send him oversized collared shirts and baseball caps from different teams, red and blue and yellow, unsure of what sports he liked or what team he rooted for. She sent him peanut butter, chocolate chip, oatmeal raisin cookies

until one night he called her up and told her straight, “I appreciate all of it, Mother, but that’s enough.”

The presents hadn’t worked for her either; no matter how many she sent she still spent most of her nights staring at a water stain on the wall across from her bed thinking of all the ways she had messed up one son’s life, trying to fend off a sleep overwhelmed by nightmare’s of the other’s death.

The only person left then was her husband, and she was quick to accuse him of being happy. How could he simply close his eyes and dream of nothing? How could he get up and go to work each day knowing that he would never again see the boy who would run into his arms screaming when he got home? How could he wrap his arms around her, tickle her and tease her like they were still the same people? How could he go so quickly and leave her all alone but for a son who, understandably, didn’t want to be near her—a son who just couldn’t seem to bring himself to take his mother’s hand at his father’s funeral?

Elizabeth lulls, tired of remembering, her head pressed to her chest. Ramona is no longer beside her, and everything is still but for the rocker swaying just slightly with her breathing, the curtains dancing away from the window, quietly licking at the shabby dresser in the corner of the room. At first the headlights below on the street seem like the glow from some other world, a tiny sun rising into a fantasyland, the purr of the engine a haunting mythical beast. But then the lights flick off and the engine growls into silence, and Elizabeth knows that something is happening in the middle of this warm summer night, something that makes the weak heart in her chest pound against its brittle cage.

Elizabeth waits as she listens to the echoes throughout the house for signs of life. She can hear the floorboards creaking and sometimes what sounds like doors opening and closing. The

air conditioner kicks on and off, and her temperature seems to change accordingly. She keeps telling herself that nothing is happening, that nothing has changed, though she doesn't believe it.

She feels her nerves singing throughout her body, more alert than she has been in months, maybe years, everything tingling. And when the door to the nursery opens, she holds her breath, unable to move, to turn her head, or to welcome the footsteps that cross the room.

Elizabeth tells herself that she isn't disappointed when Ramona comes into view.

"Don't you want to go to your room to lie down?"

The sick woman shakes her head.

"He's here," Ramona says softly.

Elizabeth looks up to search Ramona's face. "Bring him to me. Why haven't you? Bring him now."

What seems like hours later, hours of rereading the same words again and again, the door opens. A shadow comes toward the rocking chair, and it is not the shadow of the round old nurse. Peter has opened the door and found her sitting in her old rocking chair.

Elizabeth raises her eyes to the boy—the man—who stands before her. He is tall and handsome with grey in his hair and unexpected wrinkles on his face. He is a playwright and rather successful too—though Elizabeth hadn't realized that it was still considered a profession until she discovered it was her son's. He pulls up a little chair, and he sits down next to the old woman.

They sit alone in the dark room, Elizabeth rocking slowly while looking at her lap and Peter still, looking out the window at nothing with a firm countenance.

"Mother," he says finally, and that is enough for him to say. They sit in silence until the birds begin to chirp, "good morning, good morning."

Elizabeth waits, always waiting, unsure of how to put so many years into words. She *needs* to say something, to apologize, to tell him how much she has missed him, but nothing seems right. She has saved so many words inside of her; she has taken them from long novels over and over again, storing them up for this moment; she has stolen the heartbreak and turmoil and all those bitter phrases from fiction; she has captured great lines of prose and poetry, selfishly applying all of them only to her own feelings, to her own broken life, though it is the life that she has deserved. But now, now when all of these thousands of words weigh down her tongue, waiting for her mouth to open, only the birds make any sound.

Peter looks tired, but doesn't seem to have any intention of going anywhere, and together they watch the sun rise into the frame of the nursery window. Elizabeth twists her wedding band around and around as she rocks back and forth in her chair. The bright light of the morning shines in patches in the little nursery and streaks through the silver in Peter's hair. "Good morning, good morning, good morning," louder the birds sing, and Elizabeth remembers a boy with a lopsided smile straddling the back of the couch announcing that he's riding an elephant, his short little legs dangling off either side, a tiny foot pressed the soft, cream colored cushion.

Without any warning, Peter's mother lifts her hand to touch the sleeve of this familiar man, the son that she had loved and neglected, the lost boy that she needed desperately even as she anxiously tried to forget him.

"Peter. Thank you for coming," she says, the only thing that she can say.

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## VITA

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